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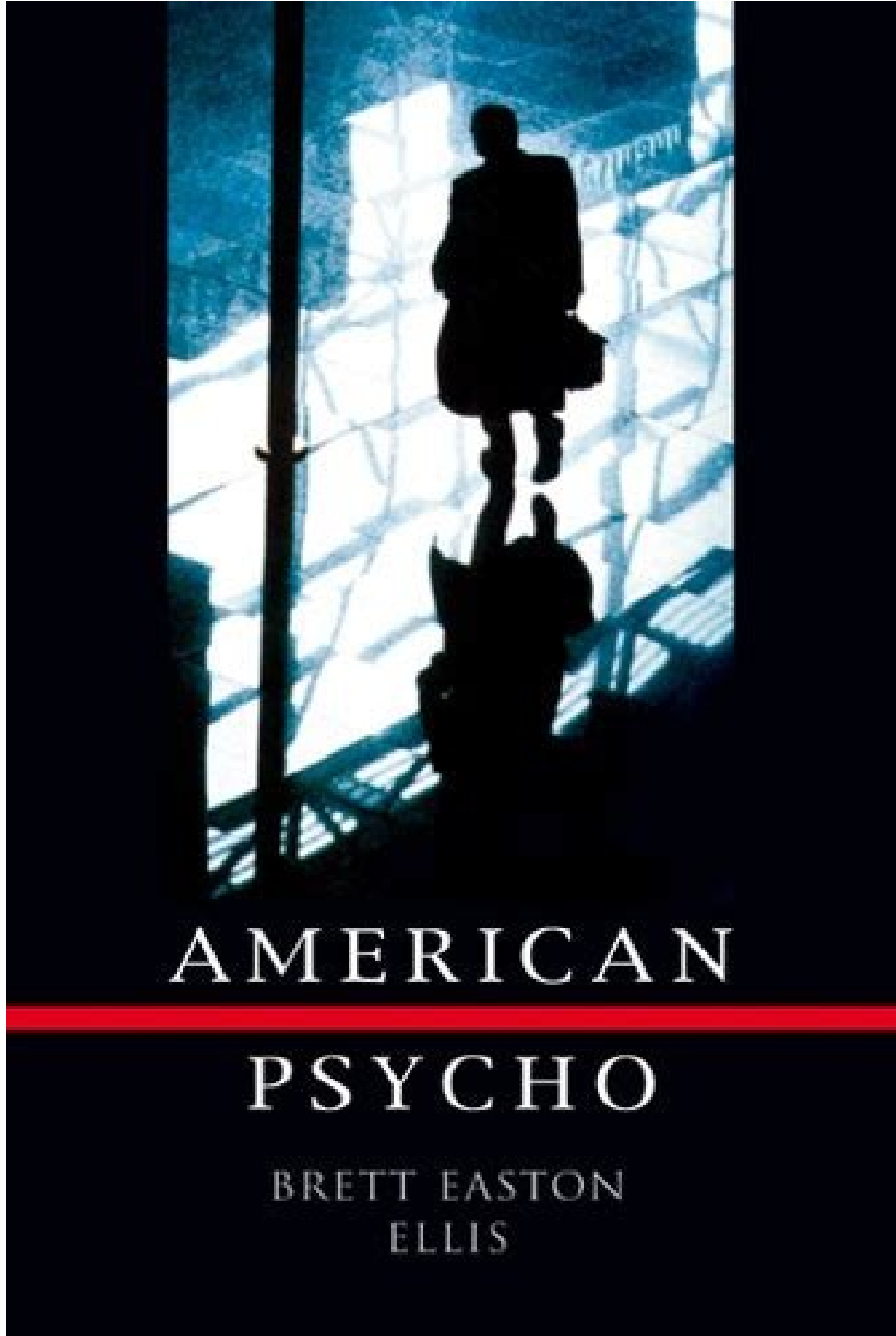

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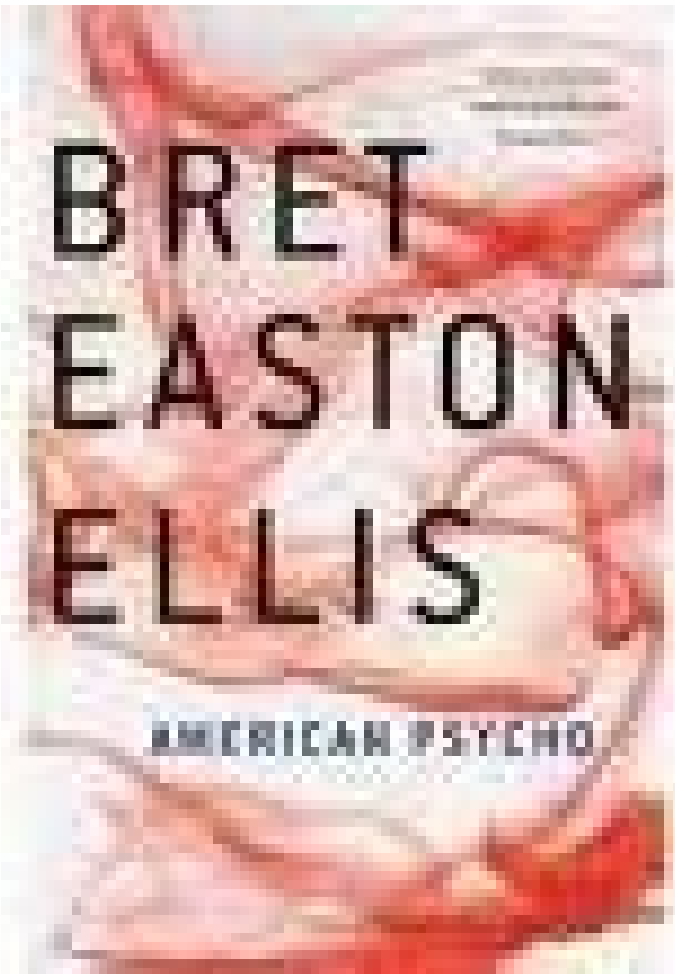
American psycho book review

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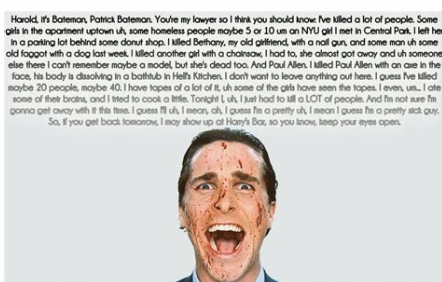
American Psycho is Bret Easton Ellis's third novel, released in 1991. The first-person narrator is a Wall Street investment banker named Patrick Bateman, who either is or imagines himself to be a prolific serial killer. Like other works which critique and lampoon 1980s "yuppie" culture, such as Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities (1984) and Oliver Stone's Wall Street (1987), American Psycho endeavors to peel away the glittering surfaces of the late-1980s Wall Street boom in order to examine its seedy and amoral underbelly. Ellis in fact borrows the name of Patrick's firm—Pierce & Pierce—from Wolfe's book.



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The novel's literary influences include nineteenth-century Gothic tales like The Picture of Dorian Gray, Dracula, and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, as well as Dante's Inferno, Marquis de Sade's The 120 Days of Sodom, and Charles Baudelaire's Flowers of Evil. Ellis's desire to shock, offend, and occasionally bore his audience also reflects the artistic legacy of Andy Warhol, whose funeral took place the same day that the novel opens, and early twentieth-century surrealists like Salvador Dali and Luis Bunuel. The chapters in the second half of American Psycho depicting violence, rape, and mutilation against women were so controversial that Simon & Schuster, the publisher that gave Ellis a \$300,000 advance for the novel, refused to publish it. Released instead by Vintage Books, the novel was panned in nearly every major publication and met with boycott campaigns organized by the National Organization for Women and feminist activists like Gloria Steinem and Kate Millett, who argued that American Psycho promoted sexual violence against women. The horrific, gratuitous renderings of brutality against women seem in part to stem from Patrick's pornographic, voyeuristic fascination with capturing surface-level details—what porn scholars like Linda Williams have called "the frenzy of the visible"—as well as his inability to transcend or understand them. Although the book's graphic content provoked outrage and disgust upon its release, it has since been recuperated by certain academics and critics for its transgressive and postmodern qualities. Mary Harron's 2000 film adaptation, adapted by Harron and Guinevere Turner, reinvents the novel as a satirical black comedy, and was hailed by The New York Times as a "mean and lean horror comedy classic." The character Patrick Bateman has himself become something of a cult figure in popular culture, becoming synonymous with a certain kind of entitled, affluent, white male sociopath. Bateman also appears briefly in Ellis's 2004 novel Lunar Park. American Psycho is one of the greatest novels of our time. Since its publication, its petulant, unerring and uncompromising face-off with this age has the effect of making most serious literary works seem obscured by an unedifying veil of sophistry. It is one of the two zeitgeist pieces of fiction that defined America at the end of the last century and the start of this one, the other being Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club. The latter novel looks at disaffection from the perspective of an excluded new underclass of youth, debt-shackled and devoid of opportunity. American Psycho, on the other hand, focuses on the ennui of morally bankrupt extreme privilege.The seismic effect of both books was genuinely felt, yet in the case of American Psycho, there also followed a highly disingenuous outrage. Those reactions were mainly directed towards the passages of extreme violence contained in the book, the objectification of women, the use of pornography and the supposed "manipulation" of the reader. Yet, they were often acts of bad faith and were based on fatuous notions.American Psycho holds a hyper-real, satirical mirror up to our faces, and the uncomfortable shock of recognition it produces is that twisted reflection of ourselves, and the world we live in. It is not the "life-affirming" (so often a coded term for "deeply conservative") novel beloved of bourgeois critics. It offers no easy resolutions to suburbanites, serves up no comforting knowledge that the flawed but fundamentally decent super guy is on hand to rescue them from the bad folks. There is no suggestion that either love or faith can save the day. All that remains is the impression that we have created a world devoid of compassion and empathy, a fertile breeding ground for monsters to thrive while hiding in plain sight. But though the novel offers no such hiding place for the reader, it furnishes us with that most impenetrable of shields: dark humour and irony. More than anything else, American Psycho is a black comedy, a satire on our dislocating culture of excess.The tone is set when the protagonist, Patrick Bateman, and his co-worker, Timothy Price, take a cab to Bateman's fiancée's home. Price narcissistically sounds off about what he believes to be his virtues: "I'm resourceful ... I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset." This statement redefines the American dream, as distorted by individualistic consumer capitalism. But Price is unaware that he's sharing a car with a monster.



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Price narcissistically sounds off about what he believes to be his virtues: "I'm resourceful... I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset." This statement redefines the American dream, as distorted by individualistic consumer capitalism. But Price is unaware that he's sharing a car with a monster. Bateman's greater obsession with living the same dream fuels a paranoid, jealous, incandescent anger, and a demented desire for power and domination. This compels him to rape, torture, and murder a multitude of victims. Matt Smith in the Almeida's 2013 production of *American Psycho*. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the GuardianIt's almost impossible to separate *American Psycho* from the reaction to it, and examining those objections helps in discerning the subversive nature of the novel. The manipulation of the reader is one of the book's most arresting features. By presenting us with a glamorous, murderous protagonist (inherited wealth, elite schooling, gym-hewn body, expensive clothes, competence in the financial world), Bret Easton Ellis rejects the norm. It's a profile light years removed from the stock reality of the serial killer as a sullen, inadequate loser. Bateman would probably be held up as an archetypal model of American success, were it not for the fact of him being a murdering psychopath. The book directly compares the power-longing, money-grubbing tendencies of the American WASPish elite to mental dysfunction. Through mixing Bateman's mundane daily activities with his brutal homicides, *American Psycho* uncomfortably closes the gap between the psychotic cultural aspects of the US - its wealth fixation, gun obsession, overseas militarism, increasing military fetishism at home - and that of the morbid, depressive preoccupations of the serial killer. The running metaphor is one of a culture succumbing to a materialist consumerism that destroys society by eradicating its human values in favour of an obsession with image. I recall, around the time of its publication, having an argument with a female friend about the violence towards women in the novel.

She said (and I've heard this argument several times): "If you are yourself subjected to the violence and misogyny of the patriarchy, then this text becomes not a criticism of, or satire on, late capitalism, with the abuse of women deployed as a metaphor, but a rendering of that abuse, a public display of it for entertainment. "While it is hard not to be sympathetic to this view, and to accept that the book will resonate, in the context of a patriarchal society, in a very different way with women than men, I argued then, as I will now, that the novel opens up a broad discussion on the workings and limits of fiction. The first important thing to remember about *American Psycho* is that everything within the novel is completely constructed, based on the culture surrounding the time during which the book was written. This truism is only worth restating as many people still childishly insist on confusing protagonists with their authors. The second thing is that the novel is always as much about the reader as the writer. As readers, we filter novels through the lens of our own cultural background and respond to them accordingly. The best of them evoke something strong in both ourselves, and the world around us. Thus there can be no "objective" analysis of the novel. The book's detractors were generally polemicists or activists rather than artists. Those who came from a different place, such as the writer Fay Weldon, tended to rejoice in it, for the very same reason their sisters loathed it: "Feminists - that's me too - see Ellis's book as anti-women. So it is. So is the world, increasingly." Had a woman written *American Psycho*, it probably would have been perceived as a great, visionary feminist work; the tendency to want to shoot the messenger, rather than read the message, comes from a place of politics, not art. But I believe the main source of unease concerning the novel is that, despite its portrayal of Bateman as superficial, pompous, lying, misogynistic, racist and narcissistic, the narrative style of *American Psycho* forces the reader to adopt his point of view.

As happens in present-tense, first-person narrative, the reader generally assumes the protagonist's concerns: the "How to get rid of the body" syndrome. Thus, the reader is implicated in both the violence and the objectifying processes of consumer society. But this participation also crucially demands that the reader makes some kind of moral judgment on the nature of these acts. That could be on a spectrum ranging from total disgust to detached indifference, perhaps even to perverse fascination. The point is that the reader is forced to confront his or her emotions in the context of the values of a society that we are all part of. The objective of pornography is to produce sexual arousal. While *American Psycho* includes pornographic scenes, they are carefully crafted and placed, and juxtaposed with horror and gore. They are not about a twisted writer's deviant projections, engineered to fuel the misogynistic fantasies of a (hopefully small) contingent of dysfunctional male readers.

In those scenes, I see only a technician at work, albeit one operating in tandem with a monstrous character he has forged as the (appropriate) tool to guide his story and address his themes. "Making a killing" on Wall Street might be a harmless turn of phrase, but it only enjoys traction because of the culture it takes place in. When Bateman answers "Murders and executions" to the question of what he does for a living, his reply is heard as "Mergers and acquisitions". By reducing his victims to material, Bateman is the alienated, urbane Ivy League serial killer in the suit. Therefore, Easton Ellis was correct to be as graphic as possible in the dismemberment scenes. Without them the novel would have been a compromise and a failure. Bret Easton Ellis.

Photograph: Graeme Robertson/GuardianBut there is little to be gained in trying to analyse the violent scenes in the book. To do so is far more pathological than the scenes themselves, which function solely in order to show the barbaric legacy of the consumerist/imperialist world we live in, the true thematic concern of the novel, by illustrating their divergence from Bateman's everyday life. Violent scenes will be upsetting to people who are sensitive or lack the ability to abstract themselves from them. Yet they are absolutely essential in *American Psycho*. In a more general sense, any attempt to prescribe what is and is not acceptable material in a novel must always be inherently censorious and ugly.

The scenarios are always played out in the imaginative domain of the reader. Censorship of the novel is therefore a direct attack on thought and creativity. Bateman, like Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*, heralded the epoch of the US cable-television antihero. Popular flawed heroes such as Dexter, in whom the psychopathic agent of destruction is recast in a cynical and reactionary way (as the good guy who aims to serve and protect the decent suburbanites), would not have emerged without Bateman. He is the purer version of the Gordon Gekkos, the wolves of Wall Street, and the plethora of movie pantomime dames of corporate capitalist villainy. The negative reviews the novel received now sound a little like the stampeding of frightened children. They came from intelligent people who couldn't get past their own shock and discomfort to ascertain the true nature of it is utterly delicious.

This spectacular wrong-footing is a testimony to the power of the book. But in a deeper sense, the moral panic around its publication represented a smokescreen, nothing less than a refusal to engage with the fact that *American Psycho*, like *Fight Club*, is essentially a "decline of empire" piece. America, with its traditions of freedom, has generally, both on the left and right, been uncomfortable with seeing itself as an empire. There exists a huge disconnect between the nation's self-image and how it is often perceived abroad. The violent contradictions of our post-democratic elitist epoch might have been displaced to an overseas "theatre of war", but by resolutely associating them with Wall Street privilege and power, Easton Ellis's novel makes a comment on the ugliness of modern capitalism and its relentless consuming-towards-extinction programme. Given that the blandness of modern capitalism (depicted brilliantly in *American Psycho*) involves rendering art into mass entertainment and crass escapism, with the novel now dominated by formulaic genre fiction slotting into marketing holes and peddling easy resolution, Easton Ellis produced a groundbreaking work, with an increasing relevance to the world we live in. He forced us (and himself) to engage with intolerable material, and the anger and fear this generated only came from a place of being struck by the terrible truth of it. We are now a good way into the 21st century, and *American Psycho* remains literature's most indispensable and savage exegesis of the society we have created. When Bret Easton Ellis's "*American Psycho*" was about to be published in 1991, word of its portrait of a monster — an amoral young Wall Street serial killer named Patrick Bateman, who nallo-gunned women to the floor before doing vastly worse to them — was met with outrage. There were death threats. A book tour was scuttled. The Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women proposed a boycott of the novel's publisher. An advance review of "*American Psycho*" in *The New York Times Book Review* was titled "Snuff This Book!" Some stores refused to stock the novel. I didn't read "*American Psycho*" at the time. I was two years out of college in 1991, and while I'd eagerly ingested the stylish mid-80s debuts of the so-called "brat pack" writers, of which Mr. Ellis's novel "*Less Than Zero*" (1985) is a crucial artifact, I'd moved on. Yet it disturbed me that, in the moral panic over "*American Psycho*," so many smart people made a rookie mistake: They'd confused author with character. Bret Easton Ellis and Patrick Bateman were pariahs. Flash forward 25 years, to 2016. Lo, how things have changed. Over the past decade or so, Bateman has become a pop something, a grinning, blood-flecked national gargoye. A brash new musical based on "*American Psycho*" is set to open on Broadway. You can purchase Bateman action figures. Bateman memes — photographs and GIFs from the director Mary Harron's excellent 2000 film version of "*American Psycho*" — splash across every corner of the web. ("I have to return some videotapes" is among the movie's indelible lines.) Benjamin Walker is preparing to play Patrick Bateman in "*American Psycho*" at the Schoenfeld Theater in New York. Credit...Richard Perry/*The New York Times*Read about Benjamin Walker, the star of the Broadway musical adaptation of "*American Psycho*." Each Halloween, there's at least one Bateman at the party, some fellow with a gleaming ax and a raincoat, his hair slicked tightly back in that cretinous late-80s style still favored by Donald Trump's sons. How to fathom the second coming of Patrick Bateman? The cult following and gradual critical embrace of Ms. Harron's film, which starred Christian Bale, has played the primary role. Ms. Harron recognized the coal-black satire in Mr. Ellis's novel and teased it to the surface. In her "*American Psycho*," dire comedy mixes with Grand Guignol. There's demented opera in some of its scenes. The film, like a painful zit on one's lower lip, pops. That Mr. Ellis's novel, alleged by some to be among the most misogynistic books in American lit, was coaxed to cinematic life by a woman adds Möbius-strip layers of cultural complexity. Film and gender scholars will be off in the corner, continuing to untangle the knots, for at least a generation. With time, the book itself has picked up a good deal of grudging respect, too. It's seen as a transgressive bag of broken glass that can be talked about alongside plasma-soaked trips like Anthony Burgess's "*A Clockwork Orange*" (1962) and Cormac McCarthy's "*Blood Meridian*" (1985), even if relatively few suggest Mr. Ellis is in those novelists' league. I read "*American Psycho*" for the first time recently, and this is certain: This novel was ahead of its time. The culture has shifted to make room for Bateman. We've developed a taste for barbaric libertines with twinkling eyes and some zing in their tortured souls. Tony Soprano, Walter White from "*Breaking Bad*," Hannibal Lecter (who predeates "*American Psycho*") — here are the most significant pop culture characters of the past 30 years. Along with Bateman, they comprise a Mount Rushmore lineup of the higher antihero naughtiness. (Lisbeth Salander in "*The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*" is among the too-rare rejoinders to a world in which men can brutalize women without regard.) Thanks to these characters, and to first-person shooter video games, we've learned to identify with the bearer of violence and not just cower before him or her. Chloë Sevigny and Christian Bale in "*American Psycho*" (2000). Credit...Kerry Hayes/Lionsgate FilmsMr. Bale's role in Bateman's liftoff is impossible to underestimate. You can trace the character's ascent along the arc of the actor's career. (Bateman, Batman, Bale, baleful — there's a malevolent linguistic richness in this subject matter.) He's slowly become recognized as the dominant actor of his generation.

This lends Ms. Harron's film backward flowing gravitas. Picking up "*American Psycho*" now, you can't help but ask yourself: Do people get outraged by books anymore? Salman Rushdie's "*The Satanic Verses*" aside — it was published three years before Mr. Ellis's novel — it's difficult to recall a recent novel that was so arduously condemned. The battles over books like "*Lady Chatterley's Lover*," "*Tropic of Cancer*" and "*Lolita*" are far back in the rearview mirror. The complicated misogyny and Islamophobia that flow through the French writer Michel Houellebecq's novels are greeted with a wink and a shrug. Reading Mr. Ellis's novel today, the hysteria of 1991 is almost inexplicable to me. It's apparent from the start that Patrick Bateman is a sendup of a blank Wall Street generation. He's a male mannequin, the ultimate soulless product of a soulless time, Warren Zevon's "*Excitable Boy*" come to howling fruition. Bret Easton Ellis's "*American Psycho*" was published in 1991. Credit...Tony Conicola/*The New York Times* The *New York Times Book Review* piece was written by Roger Rosenblatt. The novelist John Irving, also writing in the *Book Review*, correctly called Mr. Rosenblatt's essay "prissy enough to please Jesse Helms." Bateman is a serial killer. He's also an Exeter and Harvard grad, a gourmand, a tanning enthusiast and a ruthless fashion critic. A common literary-world rap against this novel was frustration with its endless litanies of what people wear. (Typical sentence: "McDermott is wearing a woven-linen suit with pleated trousers, a button-down cotton and linen shirt by Basile, a silk tie by Joseph Abboud and ostrich loafers from Susan Bennis Warren Edwards.") I found these litanies shrewd, a signal that Bateman is all about surfaces. They also feel like Mr. Ellis's satire of writers who fill their pages with descriptions of trees and birds and insects. Clothes are Bateman's pleated woodpeckers. It's impossible, in 2016, to talk about "*American Psycho*" without mentioning Bateman's hero-worship of another well-tailored suit: Donald Trump. Bateman keeps a copy of Mr. Trump's magnum opus, "*The Art of the Deal*," on his desk. His dream is to be invited on the Trump yacht. This is probably the place to point out that a recent issue of *New Statesman*, the British weekly, had a drawing of Mr. Trump on its cover with this headline: "*American Psycho*." A recent issue of *New Statesman*, the British weekly. Credit...*New Statesman* Bateman asks his girlfriend, "Why wasn't Donald Trump invited to your party?" She replies: "Oh god. Is that why you were acting like such a buffon? This obsession has got to end!" It provides a sense of this novel's offbeat comedy to print Bateman's response to this: "It was the Waldorf salad, Evelyn, I say, teeth clenched. It was the Waldorf salad that was making me act like an ass!" Who isn't driven to the brink by a Waldorf salad? This food talk is a reminder that "*American Psycho*" has yet to receive its full due as the most wicked and sustained mockery of the late-80s restaurant scene that we have in our literature. Bateman and his friends are forever sitting down to meals like eagle carpaccio and free-range squid and gazpacho with hunks of raw chicken in it. The book's consumption gets darker. By the end, Bateman attempts to turn a dead woman into meatloaf. Here we approach the grisly and infamous portions of "*American Psycho*." There are only a handful of torture scenes.

This novel is not wall-to-wall mutilation; it's wall-to-wall moral vacuity. Still, these scenes are brutal in their exactitude: There are power drills and chain saws and lips snipped off with nail clippers and vaginas cut out to store in gym lockers. Mr. Ellis told *The Paris Review* he consulted an F.B.I. textbook about serial killers to come up with some of this stuff. I sometimes had to read between my fingers. Yet there's also a comic book texture to the literal and figurative overkill. Here again, Mr. Ellis was racing ahead of the culture. Something has happened since 1991 to our response to violence, especially when it is seasoned with a shake of wet or, especially, dry humor. Increasingly inured to the mess, we've learned to savor the wit. The catharsis that horror can provide now travels on a second and more intellectualized rail. Whether this fact will save or sink us, morally, we do not yet know. Shortly after the book's publication, Mr. Ellis spoke words to *The Times* that he shouldn't have had to speak: "I would think most Americans learn in junior high to differentiate between the writer and the character he is writing about. People seem to insist I'm a monster. But Bateman is the monster. I am not on the side of that creep." The writer Donald Barthelme once put this same idea more memorably: "Don't confuse the monster on the page," he advised, "with the monster here in front of you."

"*American Psycho*" is, in its way, strangely moving. The novel is streaked with Bateman's attempts to confess his crimes. He lusts for genuine contact. He tells one woman to go home because he thinks he might harm her. "I think," he says, "I'm losing it." Writing in *Town and Country*, Mr. Ellis said recently that if he had composed the novel in the past decade, Bateman might be "palling around with [Mark] Zuckerberg and dining at the French Laundry, or lunching with Reed Hastings at Manresa in Los Gatos, wearing a Yeezy hoodie and teasing girls on Tinder." Swipe left, young ladies. Alive today, Bateman would also probably stand at the back of a Trump rally and — if he could find a designer version — pull on a red cap that reads: "Make America Great Again."