



BE AFRAID. BE VERY AFRAID. The return of Bret Easton Ellis

He's the bad boy of publishing whose books divide critics and tweets cause uproar. Now the author of *American Psycho* is back with his first novel in 13 years and a violent antihero... called Bret. Helena de Bertodano meets him at home in L.A. First question: did you ever want to be a serial killer?

PORTRAIT Leigh Keily



Bret Easton Ellis, 58, at home in Los Angeles. Opposite, from top: with fellow literary Brat Pack members Jay McInerney (left) and Tama Janowitz, New York, 1988; Christian Bale in the film version of Ellis's *American Psycho*, 2000

I am standing with Bret Easton Ellis on the balcony of his 11th-floor Hollywood apartment, the sun shining hard, the Pacific Ocean glinting in the distance. No one would hear a person screaming up here, I comment, referencing a passage in his new book, *The Shards*, in which a character yells for help from the balcony while the protagonist – called, er, Bret – brandishes a knife. “People have screamed up here before,” says Ellis in a sinister voice. “And no one came.”

He stares out at the mountains. “I started to hate this view during some of the bleaker years of my life here,” he declares, with typical curmudgeonliness. The view is so stunning that the statement borders on the absurd.

After a 13-year gap between novels, the bad boy of American letters is back, with a deranged serial killer on the loose amid a group of beautiful Los Angeles teenagers whose lives revolve around sex and drugs. *The Shards* combines two of his favourite subjects – psychopaths and glamorous party kids – and is a brilliant page-turner. Although, as Ellis says, “Who is going to read a 608-page novel narrated by a crazy gay kid?”

He must be a publisher’s and agent’s nightmare. At first, he refused point-blank to do even one interview because, he says, he just doesn’t care if the book sells or not. Or if anyone likes it or not. “And then my agent called and said, ‘Don’t be a brat. Just f***ing do the interview.’”

So here we are. Ellis is hung over and grumpy because every night at 7.30pm – come what may – he makes himself a large martini. Occasionally two. But the night before we meet he broke the golden rule of martinis and had three in one evening.

“For decades, I’ve known you can’t have three martinis. But then I thought, ‘Maybe it’s not true.’ Midway through the third one, it hit me: you f***ing can’t have three. ‘Martinis are like breasts: one isn’t enough and three are too many,’” he says, citing the old maxim.

Now 58, Ellis has long been known as the master of excess, throwing legendary parties and writing thinly disguised autobiographies about his hedonistic youth. Characters like ghosts float through his books on clouds of Xanax washed down with champagne.

Almost 40 years have passed since the publication of his first book, *Less Than Zero*, a paean to nihilistic, substance-addicted Californian party kids: affectless zombies who have limitless funds and live in a spiritual desert. The pointlessness of their lives is really the point.

The book, written while he was at high school and published when he was 21, propelled Ellis to the forefront of the emerging literary Brat Pack – a select bunch of young authors

including Jay McInerney, Tama Janowitz and Jill Eisenstadt (and, later, Donna Tartt). Loved by a cultish clan of readers and often despised by critics, their chronicling of a generation made them the literary voices of the late Eighties. But it was *Less Than Zero* that really nailed the decade.

For a few years Ellis rode that wave, a literary wunderkind, but 1991 marked the publication of *American Psycho*, his shocking third novel about a fictional Wall Street banker, the infamous Patrick Bateman, who is also a serial killer specialising in mutilation, necrophilia and cannibalism. The original publisher – Simon & Schuster – backed out, and when Random House stepped into the breach and published it anyway, Ellis became a pariah and received multiple death threats. Critics attempted to cancel him before cancel culture was a thing. “Will Bret Easton Ellis get away with murder?” asked Roger Rosenblatt in *The New York Times*, deeming the book “moronic and sadistic”.

“It was a satire on male behaviour,” sighs Ellis, who, up to a point, remains a pariah to this day. He did not help himself by later saying that Bateman was once the character he most identified with in his books. “He was a distillation of a lot of my fears and

‘I DIDN’T GET AGCOLADES. MY FAME WAS WEIRD BECAUSE IT WAS TEMPERED BY SO MANY BAD REVIEWS’

anxieties. And a fantasy figure as well. [But] now I identify with Bret in *The Shards* 100 times more.” *American Psycho* went on to become an acclaimed movie starring Christian Bale as Bateman and even – bizarrely – a musical in London and on Broadway.

Ellis wears his unpopularity almost like a badge of honour. “I have been the worst reviewed writer of my generation. I can’t name one other writer who has been as attacked as I am.” He sees it as a bonus. “To be attacked like that when you’re young [gives you] a great piece of armour.”

In *The Shards*, Bret the protagonist – who is popular and successful on the surface, isolated and paranoid underneath – becomes convinced



Ellis at the Grand Hotel, Amsterdam, 1999. Right: with his partner, Todd Schultz, in Los Angeles, 2014

that a new boy at his Los Angeles school, Buckley (where one Bret Easton Ellis was himself a student), is a serial killer. As always with Ellis, fact and fiction are mixed. Yes, he was captivated by stories of serial killers in LA at that time – but no, he doesn’t think there was one operating at his school. “I read *Helter Skelter* [about the Manson murders] when I was nine and I was absolutely horrified. It changed my childhood. It altered me for ever.”

The book is dedicated “for no one” – an antidedication from the master of subversion – and opens with this sentence, almost lyrical:

“Many years ago I realised that a book, a novel, is a dream that asks itself to be written in the same way we fall in love with

someone: the dream becomes impossible to resist, there’s nothing you can do about it, you finally give in and succumb even if your instincts tell you to run the other way because this could be, in the end, a dangerous game – someone will get hurt.”

“Someone always gets hurt,” explains Ellis today. “People feel it is about them – but my books are always primarily about me.”

Does he get hurt in the process of writing them? “I think I save myself,” he replies. “They’re an exorcism. Writing a novel has always been a way to relieve myself from pain. If I’m confused about something, something’s lost, I can’t get over something... The writing of the book is the release that drives me on.”

POLITICALLY CORRECT PRONOUNS? ‘ABSURD. I HAVE TO LAUGH. IS THAT REALLY WHAT WE’RE FIGHTING FOR?’



For years he found *The Shards* almost impossible to write because it stirred up so many emotions about his youth. When he first started 16 years ago, he “experienced an anxiety attack so severe that it sent me to the emergency room in the middle of that night”. Finally, in 2020, trapped at home during lockdown, he was able to take it up again. “It was a pandemic novel.”

We move off the balcony into the apartment, which is like a blank canvas, almost completely devoid of any personal touches, even though Ellis has lived here since 2006. The walls are bare and the furniture is beige. Piles of books are stacked on the floor. The video game *Resident Evil* lies beside a television screen. His boyfriend, Todd Schultz – who as “the 23-year-old” became a character in Ellis’s Twitter feed – is hunched over a computer in the corner of the kitchen, wearing headphones. Now 36, Schultz is still the target of Ellis’s many jokes and insults about sanctimonious millennials. “He was the inspiration for Generation Wuss,” explains Ellis.

Barefoot in black tracksuit bottoms and a black T-shirt, Ellis exudes nonchalance as he sits behind his desk, a television in front of him streaming a daytime cooking show. He turns the volume down but does not turn it off.

“I always have the Food Network on,” he explains.

But he wears his grumpiness as a thin cloak. He is actually warm and humorous company, happy to chat for hours. And it is refreshing to meet someone so singularly unconcerned about what he says. “Ask me anything,” he invites me. OK, hmm, did he

ever want to be a serial killer? “I’ve never had any fantasies about violence,” he replies equably. “I’ve never got into a physical altercation or fight.” Although he has, on occasion, wished someone dead. “Or that they’d just disappear off the face of the earth.”

Ellis is almost as well known for his outrageous tweets as he is for his novels. He once posited that film-maker Kathryn Bigelow had only won Oscars because she was “a hot woman”. *Breaking Bad*, he once said, is the most overrated TV series in the history of television “even though I want to bang the kid with cerebral palsy”. When JD Salinger died, Ellis tweeted, “Yeah!! Thank God he’s finally dead. I’ve been waiting for this day for-f***ing-ever. Party tonight!!!”

Of course he relishes the hot water in which such tweets land him. “I took the rap... I thought that was just the way Twitter was supposed to be: snarky and outrageous...”

But his reputation as “the prince of darkness”, as he puts it, is really a guise. “I helped build that persona to a degree because I wrote those books and I certainly had my Twitter run and that cemented an idea about me: the asshole on Twitter, the evil guy who wrote *American Psycho*, the misogynist, the narcissist. People say I’m a lot of things and I’ve never corrected anybody. But I think I’m a pretty mellow, SoCal [southern California] kid, an overgrown child at times, who’s 58 and a little bit shaggy and just does his thing and doesn’t have a temper.”

He stands by everything he has ever written, even the most outrageous tweets. “I don’t think I’ve ever said anything that I didn’t believe... I’ve never deleted anything. People are still picking up things I tweeted ten years ago and trying to cancel me.”

Needless to say, he has no fear of cancel culture. “Good. Cancel me. I’m an old man. I have enough money. I think it’s a virtue to be cancelled in this society at this moment.”

His ability to offend people is only matched by the inability of any of his detractors to rile him. James Wolcott noted in the *London Review of Books* that Ellis had a gift for “upsetting the maximum number of people with the minimum amount of effort”.

“I think that’s true,” agrees Ellis.

“Is Bret Easton Ellis dead inside?” asked one of his followers in shock following the Salinger tweet. “I actually am,” he replies today. And he is not entirely joking. Numbness is exalted as a sublime state in *The Shards* – as it is in many of his other books. “Numbness as a feeling,” comments Bret the narrator, “numbness as a motivation, numbness as the reason to exist, numbness as ecstasy.”

“It’s a guiding aesthetic of mine,” Ellis sort of explains. “I’ve always believed numbness is an actual pulsating feeling.”

The son of a property developer, Ellis

grew up in Los Angeles. Although he went to private school and was given endless “opportunity and freedom”, his childhood was not without problems: his parents argued constantly, especially about his father’s drinking. “There was a very unhappy marriage in the house. There was alcoholism. There was my father’s rage. There was my burgeoning gayness [which upset his father]... It was at times nightmarish.”

Nonetheless he is relieved he grew up in the era he did. “We grew up in a completely free society that was open to everything: all kinds of expression, all kinds of profanity.”

He cannot think of anything worse than going to college now. “I think they’re terrible places: the rules, the eggshells you have to walk on. The lack of freedom. A constant authority everywhere judging how you can express yourself. Terrible. The freedom by comparison [back then] was vast and immense.”

He was, by his own account, an unusual child. “As a little boy I had a flamboyant side that was just not quite the norm. And I was very into books and movies. I was very sophisticated.” Even then he had a propensity to embellish and invent stories. “I had an imagination that spilt into my real life.” One of his earliest memories is telling everyone at primary school his mother was pregnant with triplets and about to give birth. “Everyone was so excited: the principal called my mother, who was shocked. She wasn’t even pregnant and said, ‘Why would you say this?’”

After private school, he went to Bennington College where he studied music and writing – fellow students at the time included Donna Tartt, who later became a friend. “We occasionally went out together because my boyfriend and her boyfriend were best friends.”

Following the publication of *Less Than Zero*, Ellis moved to New York, where he established his reputation not only as a literary phenomenon but also as a wild party animal. He looks back on that decade as “an absolute blast”. “It was so exciting to be in New York. Everything was converging: the music scene, the fashion scene. Publishing was glamorous. The magazine world was insane.”

The parties he himself threw were the talk of the town. “I would always be planning the next party in my head. It was a very, very creative thing: the music, the menu, what the bartenders should be wearing. Sometimes I left a party I was throwing and I would be having another party somewhere else... The first party was the pre-party. That was probably at the height of my drug days. I can’t believe it now, but I thought [the parties] were really fun. Until, at a certain point, they weren’t.”

Somehow Ellis never quite lost control. “It could have been a lot more hedonistic. ➤

I was careful because I like to write. And I would much rather write a book than do coke. Now did I do too much cocaine? Definitely. It's remarkable that I never went to rehab but I never had a problem... If you have a novel that you want to write, that's your friend for a long time. For me a stronger pull than a lover. And it always has been."

All his books, he says, are deliberately outlandish. "They aren't realistic novels. *American Psycho* is a hallucinatory novel told by a madman. I think all the narrators are to one degree or another un..." He casts around for the right word. "Un... What do you say?" Unhinged, I suggest. He laughs. "Unreliable. Unhinged, as well... My characters aren't likeable. Even now I am seeing it in previews of *The Shards*: 'I hated everybody in it. A murderous queen is the narrator.'"

Although "thick-skinned" about what people say about his work, he is much more sensitive in his private life. "I have been very hurt in romantic relationships. I am very sensitive about rejection. I tend to have gone overboard with my emotions in that realm. But you can say anything about my writing and I don't care."

His celebrity often puts an added strain on relationships. "I really don't get it because there's so little nutritional value to fame. I don't understand when a partner feels a kind of imbalance and invisible because of that." But his first long-term boyfriend, "an older lawyer I began to see in New York in the late Eighties", struggled with it. "There was a lot of resentment; [he felt] he was nothing in this relationship and I was this big thing. I find that absurd."

His fame, he points out, was not of the enviable sort. "It wasn't accolades and awards and, 'You're so handsome.' It was a very weird kind of fame because it was tempered by so many bad reviews. [I was] pushed off to one side of the literary solar system."

After breaking up with the lawyer, he had a six-year relationship with a sculptor, who died suddenly, aged 30, of an aortic aneurysm. "That was the end of the party for me," says Ellis. He left New York and moved to Los Angeles where, a few years later, he met Schultz, a musician.

I ask him why, given his views, he would want to be with someone from Generation Wuss.

"I didn't. It just happened. I was looking for a nice doctor or lawyer my age or older, someone who could take care of me. But we met and he was really funny. I thought, this will be fun for a couple of weeks. And then we just grew extremely comfortable with each other."

He and Schultz used to argue furiously about politics – particularly about Ellis's refusal to participate in Trump-bashing.

'DID I DO TOO MUCH COCAINE? DEFINITELY. IT'S REMARKABLE THAT I NEVER WENT TO REHAB'

"Being neutral on Trump is a big problem in Hollywood." They still snipe at each other. "He used to try to get a rise out of me. But I'm exhausted... So our fights don't go much past six or seven sentences now. I think we are fairly close in terms of both agreeing on the absurdity of our world right now."

Yet Ellis continues to talk and write about his partner with unfiltered openness. Does Schultz mind being used as creative material? "He has no choice," replies Ellis baldly. "Also, he has a sense of humour. And he did make a character out of himself, detailing his drug addiction online." Schultz, he volunteers, has had a rocky couple of years. "He had some drug issues and some psychotic episodes. The police came round and he was homeless for a bit. It was an extremely stressful living environment until he got help."

Schultz spent three months in rehab while Ellis "lost myself in the book for 14-hour days". Now Schultz is on an even keel. "He had a really good job out of rehab – in phone sales, making good money. But he's a millennial. The quitting generation. So he couldn't handle it. Now he's getting back into his music again. Writing scripts. Whatever."

Posturing as a jaded misanthrope these days, Ellis sees almost no one except his personal trainer and Schultz. "I don't like people any more and I don't like to have anybody over here. I have a very solitary existence."

He hopes Schultz eventually moves on – for his own sake. "As I enter into my decrepitude I keep telling him, 'Please have a back-up plan. You don't want to be wiping the drool off my mouth when I'm 70.'"

Although Ellis says he can no longer be bothered to be "an exhibitionistic public person on social media", sticking his hand into every available wasp nest, he needs little prodding when you want a reaction. I ask him how he feels about the current insistence on politically correct pronouns, with correspondence signed accordingly. He waves a hand and splutters impatiently, "Absurd, absurd. Hilarious, hilarious. I know that they have to do it at my publishing house and my agency. I just have to laugh... Pronouns! Is that really what we're fighting for?"

Nor does he think we should be forced to accept people as whatever they say they are. "If you want to identify as a cat, identify as a cat, but don't ask me to accept it. Be a cat. Be a dog. If you're a boy and you think you're a girl, be a girl. I have no problem. But don't demand that we have to call you a plushie or a cat. And if we don't, we are transphobic cat haters and horrible people... I think that is

authoritarian. That is not how I was raised. That's not freedom."

And yet, sigh, he really can't be bothered to get too worked up about anything any more. "Doesn't everything pass? Doesn't entropy come into everything? You would think the Women's March [a feminist action group] would still be going, but it broke up in two years with all the infighting. Shall we get into Black Lives Matter and the scandals going on there? Do you remember [he is openly chortling now] when everyone had to put a black box on their Twitter feed [following George Floyd's death] otherwise they thought they would be fired? I mean, puh-lease!"

Instead of setting off daily bombs on Twitter, Ellis now airs his views on his eponymous weekly cultural podcast, where he chats with guests such as Kanye West, with whom he has collaborated in the past. He describes West as "alternately brilliant and baffling". Even he is puzzled by West's most recent antisemitic outbursts. "I don't really know why he wants to die on this hill. I don't know if he thinks he's going to become a prophet. But did it really warrant taking his mannequin out of Madame Tussauds? The virtue-signalling is absurd."

And he is working on a series of spy novels with a female protagonist "who becomes increasingly unhinged". He has already completed the first book but is encountering resistance from his publishers about writing in a woman's voice. "I could rewrite it as a guy. But I'm much more interested in the book as it is."

If he had another career, he says, he would have been a porn star. At first, I think he is joking but he doubles down: "I am interested in porn beyond even self-pleasuring. I'm interested in how it's shot. I follow all the porn magazines and sites: all the gossip of porn stars, how much you're being paid for this bottom scene. It's just a fascinating world. Todd thinks it is disgusting."

We have moved through to the kitchen now where Ellis is lining up the ingredients for his evening martini: the Beefeater gin, the glass, the ice. I ask him how he would like to be remembered. His answer is heartfelt and inevitable, a distillation of the persona on which he has based his literary identity: "I genuinely do not care." ■

The Shards by Bret Easton Ellis is published by Swift (£25). He'll be discussing his new novel at the Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall on February 2, with tickets from £15 (southbankcentre.co.uk)