Bret Easton Ellis on not writi novels



October 21, 2016 - Bret Easton Ellis's seven novels have been translated into over 27 different languages. In addition to his podcast, Ellis recently worked with artist Alex Isreal on a series of collaborative paintings, which were shown in Los Angeles at Gagosian Gallery. *The Deleted*—a web series written and directed by Ellis—will premiere in December via Fullscreen.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2163 words.

Tags: Writing, Beginnings, Multi-tasking, Collaboration.

Over the past few years you've managed to creatively shift gears a few times—screenwriting, directing, podcasting—but most people still think of you as a novelist. Did you always know that was going to be your primary creative path?

Sort of. Actually, what this question reminds me of—and I'm going to be a little digressive here—is that the recent reviews for *American Psycho—The Musical* really gave journalists and critics the opportunity to go back and revisit the original book. Sometimes they really slammed the book—I specifically remember the Jesse Green review in *New York* magazine where he spent three paragraphs completely ripping the book and accusing me of an aesthetic that, for me, only really existed when I was around 23 to 26 years old. That aesthetic does not exist anymore for me. I would never write *American Psycho* now. That book represents a moment where that was what I was thinking about—the novel.

At that time I was really thinking about the *idea* of the novel. How do you present the novel? How do you fuck with the form of the novel a little bit? As I'm looking back at my childhood and my adolescence, yes, I was writing a lot. I did think it was a possibility that I'd be a writer. I also grew up in a town where everyone I knew was going to get into the film business, because as you know, LA is a "company town" like, say, Flint, Michigan is a company town, or whatever. You grow up out here on a certain side of the hill and that's just what you do, whether you're a director, an executive, an agent, whatever. So I thought that was a possibility as well. I'd grow up and work in the movies somehow.

I would never write *American Psycho* now.

Then at 17 and 18 I got into this band with John Shanks. I was the guitarist and I really believed for that year that we wrote songs together that something big might happen for us. I mean, who knows. We didn't even properly record anything, we just taped things onto cassettes and I don't even know who has those anymore. We actually had a manager though and we were about to do stuff and then it was the summer of '82 and suddenly I heard: "You have to go to college," like, "*You HAVE to go*." My parents, my grandparents, everyone was insistent. It wasn't even a question, really. I kinda wanted to go anyway, so it was actually fine. So then it flipped again, this notion of what I would do with my life.

I thought, "Oh, I'm going to miss that," when I left for school and the band stopped. But things changed when I got to Bennington. I realized that I was writing a lot and I wanted to finally write a version of this thing, this project, that I had been working on off and on since I was about 15 or 16. The *Less Than Zero* project was really made up from journals and diary entries fictionalizing parties I had been to, making everything much darker, much more sexual, and a fair amount druggier. It was a kind of exaggerated portrait of my adolescent years in LA. I finally realized, "Okay, I want to turn this into something"—and that's how it happened.

So, I wrote some books. Then, over the years, I just think things changed. I don't know how much I believe in the validity of the novel right now—at least for myself—and now I find myself really drawn towards, of all things, a web series, which I'm writing and directing. I like it much more than a TV series because it's cheaper and there's more freedom for me and my very small team to do what we want for two hours, which constitutes a season with a web series.

Everyone always tells me, "Out of all that stuff you do now, you still write books the best, so *maybe* think about doing that again?" It is what it is. Writing books is not what interests me right now.

I think that as you get older you have other interests that you want to explore. With all the opportunities in this DIY culture that are open to everyone, I can't imagine why you wouldn't want to be a bit of a James Franco. I know he gets slammed for it all the time—for being a dabbler, for taking on so many different art forms—and a lot of it really isn't good, but I just love that kind of rangy experimentation. For me, whether it was doing these paintings with Alex Israel, or doing the web series, or recording a podcast that is making nobody any money (but still I like to do it and people enjoy it), then I'm happily, creatively occupied. That's where I'm at. At the same time everyone always tells me, "Well, you know, out of all that stuff you do now, you still write books the best, so *maybe* think about doing that again?" I am confronted with that all the time, but it is what it is. Writing books is not what interests me right now.

For a lot of people, the creative impulse can be very abstract—a general desire to make things, try things, experiment. For other people, it's super specific. Do you feel like all of these different projects essentially scratch the same itch?

They do. They completely do. I think that working on the scripts for this web series was just as satisfying—in a completely different way—than working on a novel. I also like the interaction with people when working on the series… to a degree. The creative people I definitely enjoy interacting with, the executive people not so much. I'm accepting of the fact that it is collaborative, which I don't really have a problem with, though I do generally believe that the *less* collaborative things are, the better. It really is. That is something that I do kind of fight against—collaborating—but certainly I learn a lot from the people I work with: my DPs, my cinematographers, the people on the crew. Shooting those commercials for Persol and the Paris Opera a couple of years ago, I learned so much about editing and sound design. It's all been a great lesson for me.

I do generally believe that the less collaborative things are, the better.

I think learning about things is interesting and I don't think you learn everything by the time you get to be a certain age. There's a lot to know. I mean look, you're so burnt out on life and people anyway by a certain age, why not learn other stuff? Why not discover some hidden talents? Why not have some other hobbies? I mean, certainly collecting people or hanging out with strangers is not what I want to do at the age of 52. I already have my friends, so the idea of going to parties now? Ughh. Oh my god, going to a cocktail party or a film screening just terrifies me. I'm open to learning new things, but that doesn't mean to I want to go out in public and talk to people.

You also have a popular podcast. Does talking to people in that context also satisfy some kind of creative urge?

Yes. Sometimes I don't even think our podcast is that good. I honestly don't. I think that it could always be better. I'm always kind of disappointed by how it turns out, but then I listen to other podcasts and suddenly I'm perfectly happy with ours. Perfectly happy. The one thing that me and my producer want to make sure of is that we're not really a "driving to work" podcast or a "hey did you watch the game last night?" kind of podcast. If we decide to do a podcast about a particular cultural subject—be it film, tv, whatever—then the guest comes in and kind of gets dropped into that subject. We wanted to make sure that it wasn't just some kind of promotional

podcast—some person coming in to plug their current project.

That being said, I did have Illeana Douglas on and we did talk about her book, though it was really not about her book at all. I just did a podcast with Alex Gibney who has a movie coming up called *Zero Days*, though I'm not really interested in talking about that. I'm more interested in where he thinks the culture is right now. Also, he's moving into fictional filmmaking. Why? I'm more interested in that.

You're so burnt out on life and people anyway by a certain age, why not learn other stuff? Why not discover some hidden talents? Why not have some other hobbies?

I did Marc Maron's podcast and you know what happens there? You go out to the back, you sit across from him at a desk in his garage, and he opens your Wikipedia page. That is the Marc Maron experience. I like Marc a lot as a person and he's been on my podcast as well. I just think he's one of those people who is always on. I felt like I was interrupted all the time by him and that he's always interjecting all of this stuff… but look, it *is* the Marc Maron Show. I get it. And similarly, my show *is* the Bret Easton Ellis Podcast. When people criticize me for talking way too much I think about the fact that I also get a lot of praise saying that, "You should talk more!" So I don't know. You can't please everyone. I mean, I'm happy with it. I don't know really where it's going and I don't know exactly why I'm doing it, but there's something about talking to people that I enjoy.

How do you prepare for interviewing people?

I generally have three sections of stuff that I want to take the person through, but sometimes it just goes where it goes. For example, the Illeana Douglas podcast. I had never heard her talk about Scorsese. Even in her book, she doesn't talk about him, which I found kind of curious. I knew something had gone wrong with *Grace of My Heart*, the Allison Anders movie she did that Scorsese produced. So I brought it up and she really went into it. She said, "Yeah, Marty ruined the movie. He ruined it and it was the end of our relationship and it was a very hard thing." She was Scorsese's girlfriend for eight years and even then she said that "It did not open a single door. He did not open anything for me. In fact, it was a hindrance." It was so interesting to hear her talk about that. She visibly grew very passionate while discussing it and I kept thinking, "Why hasn't anyone talked to her about this before? Why hasn't this been out there?" So that was super interesting to me and weirdly satisfying, even if just for my own gratification.

Bret Easton Ellis recommends:

Being a teen in the late 70s/early 80s in LA

The collected works of *Joan Didion*

Pauline Kael's movie reviews from roughly 1971-1980.

Robert Altman movies

Corbin Fisher porn from 2005-2008.

Podcasts get a bad rap sometimes as being somewhat disposable, but they are often much more insightful than a traditional print interview.

In a way it's kind of almost archival. I don't know. We'll see where it goes. I drive the advertisers crazy because I want to have on people like Peter Bogdanovich, whereas they want me to have on terrible young people who are big on social media. They want you to book guests that have at least 400,000 Twitter followers because that's what gets the word out. It also helps if you have a guest on who will say something provocative. Our highest downloads were the ones that involved some sort of controversy. The one with the guy from Passion Pit coming out of the closet. Or Alex Pettyfer talking about how much Channing Tatum hates him. We have never gotten so much press from a single podcast. It was national entertainment news, which is… well, ridiculous. You just never know.

You’re good at getting people to open up. Maybe you’re more of a people person than you realize.

As much as I say that I hate people, what I mean is that I hate people in terms of watching the news, looking at social media, or having to go out to something in public—especially here in LA—you know what I’m saying? But people are also really interesting… or they can be. And as you know I like to talk, so it works.

Name
Bret Easton Ellis

Vocation
Novelist, Screenwriter, Director, Podcaster

Fact

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