





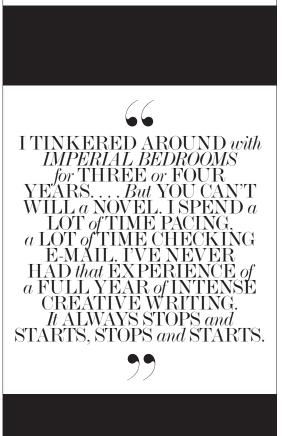
It isn't difficult to see why Bret Easton Ellis's 1985 debut novel Less Than Zero-by a then unknown 21vear-old Bennington College student with a name that sounded like it was copied from a cotillion guest list-created so much shock, anxiety, and nihilistic glee within the literary and cultural community. The first sentence of the book reads like a travel warning of destruction ahead: "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles. . . . " The reason that Less Than Zero is so unforgettable is that few books in recent decades have managed to so utterly ransack all accepted notions and conceits-of youth, of the West Coast mentality, of what it means not so much to get to the land of the rich and famous but to actually be there, having already arrived.

Less Than Zero turned Ellis into an instant literary sensation, and for a while the author lived in New York City as one of the princes of a cool new beautiful MTV-generation literati. But in the intervening 25 years, Ellis has refused to ride the shock waves of his auspicious debut. He continued to press the limits of fiction and its moral order until the reckless, disaffected, anesthetized lifestyles of a bunch of rich 18-year-old Hollywood kids seemed almost like a warm-up for the horrors to come: The Rules of Attraction (1987), American Psycho (1991), The Informers (1994), Glamorama (1998), and Lunar Park (2005). It is still to this day difficult to talk about the social impact of these books-most critics are loath to comment on how to situate them in American fiction. But the novels gave Ellis the two-pronged reputation as a demon of the literary community and a shaman of radical, disenfranchised youth. If something akin to a cultural fatwa has been placed on Ellis's head by the mainstream intellectual community, he has also become a saintly figure for those interested in reading against the grain.

Sentimentality has no place in Ellis's worldsso much so that it is a wonder when any character thinks in the past tense at all. But now, 25 years after Less Than Zero launched his career, Ellis has made another shocking departure by going back to where he started. In June, Ellis releases Imperial Bedrooms, a sequel to his debut, which drops in on Clay, Blair, Julian, and other Less Than Zero denizens who, now in their forties, are haunting and haunted by the post-glamour, post-shock, post-moral, post-purpose Hollywood scene. Clay is now a screenwriter. Upon returning to Los Angeles from New York to work on a film, he slowly falls back into old ways-parties, drugs, sex—as the plot teems with more-graphic Ellisian tropes like murder, ghosts, dismemberment, and paranoia. For anyone assuming that the author has created something of an upbeat 90210 reunion, the opening pages clarify the difference between Hollywood's favorite export and the actual on-the-ground circumstance: "The movie was begging for our sympathy," says Clay, referring to the 1987 film version of Less Than Zero, "whereas the book didn't give a shit." Ellis, like Clay, also moved from New York back to his native Los Angeles a few years ago. Imperial Bedrooms exhibits some of the tension of that fracture, as well as Ellis's own frustrated work on the unexceptional film version of his short-story collection. The Informers.

Now, at age 46, Ellis has made a home for himself in L.A. and a second career as a screenwriter. (He's currently working on a script for Gus Van Sant about the tragic double suicide of artist Jeremy Blake and his longtime girlfriend, the writer and filmmaker Theresa Duncan.) At a certain point in this interview, Ellis accuses me of taking a very nostalgic tone toward his work-particularly when I ask if the Less Than Zero characters could ever have become happy, functioning adults—and only after we got off the phone did it occur to me that he is right. I was was raised in Southern California. But I actually never excusable—because the characters are 18 years old.

still holding on to the belief that a reader should be in love with the main character, that a novel's arc is somehow always directed toward reconciliation, or even that characters are individuals distinguishable from their surroundings. Part of the power of Ellis's work lies in the fact that his readers can no longer rely on these romantic, humanistic notions. Clav. Blair, and Julian aren't there, and you don't have to love them or hope they survive. This quality makes Ellis very uncomfortable to read but actually very engaging to talk to. I called him in Palm Springs, where he likes to spend a few days each week hiding out from the madness of his native city. CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: In Imperial Bedrooms,



the main character, Clay, has returned to L.A. after years of living in New York City. I know you've kept your apartment in New York, but you yourself moved back to Los Angeles a few years ago. Was that because you were sick of New York, or was it because L.A. was calling?

BRET EASTON ELLIS: I had a really good run in as it was. But the party ends at a certain point, and it was becoming less fun.

BOLLEN: And L.A. started being more fun?

ELLIS: I just found myself spending more time out here, and there was something about the vibe of Los Angeles that appealed to me. I was also getting work in terms of screenwriting. So I decided to move out and make a go of it. . . . And you know what? It's been a terrible mistake. It was the worst decision I've ever made in my life. [*laughs*]

BOLLEN: Because you bought property and now you're stuck with it, right?

ELLIS: Yeah, I bought a place at the height of the market, and so I am sort of stuck. But it hasn't been bad. It just took a long time for me to acclimate to Los Angeles because I've never lived here as an adult. When I graduated from college, I went straight to New York. I remember how I couldn't get used to the winters in the East. I'd come back here a lot, because I

lived here on my own, so it was a bit of a shock.

BOLLEN: The funny thing is, people see you as a consummate L.A. writer. You've written a lot on New York, but for some reason you've been stamped as the voice of Los Angeles.

ELLIS: I've written three books set in L.A. I've only written one book wholly set in New York, and then another book set half in New York and half in Europe. So if you look at the bulk of the work, L.A. wins. But honestly, what does being an "L.A. writer" even mean? BOLLEN: I don't know. What does it mean to you? ELLIS: It doesn't mean anything to me.

BOLLEN: But Los Angeles as a literary setting must mean something to you, because you did choose to revisit the characters and location of Less Than Zero. ELLIS: The reason is that I was interested in where Clay would be now. While working on Lunar Park, I started rereading all of my books, which I hadn't done in many, many years. Despite the fear and embarrassment over much of the material-

BOLLEN: Wait, that's hard to believe. You're supposed to be embarrassed about the sentimental stuff. But there isn't a lot of that in your novels.

ELLIS: Well, there's some in Lunar Park, I guess. But anyway, I just became obsessed with the idea of where Clay was. The question wouldn't let go of me. So I had to write the novel to find out. For me, when I become obsessed with an idea—it can be a great idea or a terrible idea, it doesn't matter-that's how I start writing. I'm writing because of whatever's going on with me emotionally at the time. There's no real plan.

BOLLEN: In the opening chapter of Imperial Bedrooms, the narrator, Clay, talks about the author of Less Than Zero-in a sense, immediately separating you the writer from the book's main character. When Less Than Zero first came out in 1985, a lot of people assumed it was autobiographical. Did you feel the need to make that distinction?

ELLIS: I think a lot of times when I talked about Less Than Zero. I wanted to make the distinction that I was not that narrator. That was a novel I worked on for three or four years. I'd written three different versions of it as a teenager. Less Than Zero was not some story I wrote during an eight-week crystal-meth binge, which is part of the lore of the book. When I wrote it, I intentionally set out to write fiction that was not necessarily about my life. Now, of course, as I've gotten older and I've looked back on it, I've thought, "Okay. You know what? It obviously came from a place within me, and there are similarities, and to disavow my closeness to the narrator is a little disingenuous." There was probably more in common than I wanted to admit. But I always thought the better answer was, "No, Clay is a made-up guy; New York. I couldn't have imagined it being as fun he's an abstract idea more than a fully realized character"-which to a degree is absolutely true. I felt his voice was more evocative of something going on in the culture at the time.

BOLLEN: When you figured out where Clay would be today, did you base that on the culture at large or on how certain people you knew from the '80s ended up? ELLIS: I was thinking, "What did growing up in that environment do to this man, now in his forties?" I realized that he would have ended up in Hollywood. because most of my friends did. And then I thought, "What is the central myth of Hollywood?" It is exploitation. It is people exploiting each other, and it became a very interesting idea to have the book based around that. And also just about the narcissism of this generation and asking where that leads you. BOLLEN: One very big difference between the characters of Less Than Zero and Imperial Bedrooms is their age. A lot of the behavior in Less Than Zero could be deemed somewhat understandable-if not

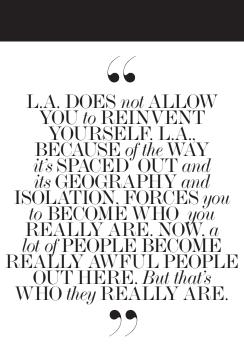
They're privileged, reckless children. But it's a difand thought she did a great job. ferent response to find them 25 years later as very be a little tricky. There's no logic to Hollywood. I ELLIS: I have to agree with you. I remember Jami dark, horrifying adults living by the same moral think that's the thing that drives people crazy: its lack Gertz's performance being the thing that I liked least code. That's exactly what makes Imperial Bedrooms of logic. But that also inspires a lot of weird optimism. about the movie. But I was wrong. I like her in that more terrifying than Less Than Zero. Although, I sup-You work on a movie and 98 percent of the time it movie now. I find something very touching and vulpose in some ways it probably would have been more doesn't end up happening. So in order to be creative, nerable about her. I think she's stunningly beautiful. It frightening to find Clay, Blair, and Julian as happy you have to work as well as you can on a project and works. I like everyone in it. But whatever, it's kind of a Orange County parents with SUVs full of children. have optimism. You have to hope it does work out. princely problem to sit around complaining about the ELLIS: If I wrote Imperial Bedrooms now, or started BOLLEN: Obviously the difference between the movies that have been made from your books. I don't working on it now, I think it would be very different. novel Less Than Zero and the 1987 film version is know where that gets me, at the end of the day. The book reflects where I was during the period I striking. You mention that anomaly at the beginning BOLLEN: Do you have good memories of being wrote it. I wasn't really that happy—it was a pretty of Imperial Bedrooms. Do you remember how you felt, shortly out of Bennington and living in New York as dark time. first seeing Less Than Zero on-screen? already such a famous writer?

BOLLEN: Why was that? Because you had just ELLIS: When I saw the movie, I was, like, 23. When moved from New York?

ELLIS: Yeah. The transition was harder than I thought it was going to be. Also, I was involved in the film project for *The Informers* and had extremely high hopes for it. That project took two and a half years, and it was very stressful and genuinely dismaying. I thought the script for it was the best I'd written, and I was very proud of it at first. We got all these actors involved and had the money together, and then . . . the fuck-up happened. It happened slowly and then very quickly. It was happening while I was working on Imperial Bedrooms, and my mood was affected by it. That mood is reflected in the book. I can flip through the novel and point to any paragraph and go, "Oh yeah, I wrote that in November '07," or "That's from April '08." But the book was also a chance for me to revisit the style of minimalism, which I hadn't done in many years. And I had been reading a lot of Raymond Chandler, too. I love Raymond Chandler and wanted to attempt-BOLLEN: A Raymond Chandler-style mystery? ELLIS: But the mystery itself doesn't matter. You know, the answers don't matter in the end of a Raymond Chandler novel. What's so interesting isn't who did it and how. It's more the mood it creates and what the journey does to the characters, which is very compelling.

BOLLEN: Would you say that your particular view of really think this about themselves?" Hollywood in this book is that it's a place where people BOLLEN: It's gotten to the point that embarrassare just endlessly exploited until there's nothing left? ing yourself has overstepped talent. Talent is far less ELLIS: [laughs] I don't know anyone who wouldn't interesting or consumable than public spectacle. agree with that. Look, it is what it is. No one ELLIS: Do we judge that human craving for attenholds a gun up to anyone's head to make a livtion? For fame? Doesn't that need seem human in a ing from this business. If you're going to complain you're 23 and they make a movie out of your book, way? "I'm here. I exist. Look at me." There's someabout Hollywood, I really don't want to hear it. I you're just excited that they're doing it—that they're thing weird about people putting that need down or did realize I was going to be writing a Hollywood transferring your novel into a medium that you judging it. I don't know. I feel too contradictory when really love. But I still can remember that I was disap-I discuss this. One side of me thinks, "This is ridicnovel—because of Clay's profession and what the other characters' professions are. But I didn't want pointed when I saw it. I thought, "That's interesting. ulous." And then the other side says, "No, it's also to write jokes about shitty movies. And I didn't They didn't use a single scene from the book in the human." I guess I just don't know if I'm really that want to write a Bruce Wagner novel, as much as I movie. How did they do that?" There is no scene or interested in complaining about the culture anymore. like Bruce Wagner, because it's been done. I've been dialogue from the book in that movie. BOLLEN: When you were rereading all of your working within Hollywood for the last three or four BOLLEN: You could basically novelize that movie, books, were you ever surprised by the volatile years. Participating in it is not funny. So the rule and it would be an entirely different book. responses they received when they were published? that I made for this book was "No satire." ELLIS: It was an entirely different thing. But I Certainly American Psycho and Glamorama weren't BOLLEN: I think that fits in with the fact that the had actually been warned by the director [Marek exactly universally appreciated, which is probably larger world has gotten wise to Hollywood. Until the Kanievska] about a week before I went to a private why we can identify them today as far ahead of their last decade, there was still that dream of going out to screening for my friends in New York. I met the time. Obviously you aren't a writer who bends his Hollywood and becoming a movie star and making director in a restaurant late in the afternoon, and he style to appease critics, but . . . ELLIS: Oh, god, no! Terrible idea. Note to future it big. But I don't think the general public is so naïve was drunk. The first thing he said to me was "I'm so or optimistic about Hollywood anymore. sorry." I thought, "Holy shit!" Of course, I had heard writers: terrible idea. The only way it works for me ELLIS: Good! Because it was a dream. The empire's all the stories about the problems on the movie set, is that it's something I want to do. It's emotional. I'm over, baby. That world you're describing? We've and the producer and the director had clashed, and just trying to sort out what's going on in my life at the moved on. We're on a different road now. You can cry | the studio . . . whatever—just a lot of problems. But | time, and these books reflect it. I wish I were the kind you know, whenever I see it, I still think it's a visually of writer who is constantly ¬ Continued on page TKT about it, or just accept it for what it is. The idea you just expressed was a version of Hollywood. But today ravishing movie. It looks spectacular. it's much more corporate. It's about 3-D or IMAX and CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN IS *INTERVIEW*'S EDITOR AT LARGE. *GROOMING PRODUCTS*: CLARINS MEN, *INCLUDING REVITALIZING GEL MOISTURIZER. HAIR:* DAVID BABAII FOR MOROCCANOIL/TRACEY MATTINGLY. *MAKEUP*: MARK BOLLEN: It's gorgeous. "Let's go on a ride." Movies are made by consortiums ELLIS: But it completely inverted the meaning of now, not by individuals. But I still really love movies the book. FOR MOROCANOLL/TAGEY MATTINGLY. MARGOP: MARK CARRASQUILLOJART + COMMERCE. PRODUCTION: NORTH6. STYLIST ASSISTANT: SARA NATAFF. SPECIAL THANKS: THE STANDARD HOLLY WOOD. FASHION DETAILS PAGE TKT. >SEE MORE OF BRET EASTON ELLIS ON INTERVIEWMAGAZINE.COM and have seen a lot of good ones this year, so I'm not BOLLEN: I was a kid when I saw the movie on HBO, really down on the business. Hollywood can be a disand I remember thinking even then that Jami Gertz turbingly cold place, and you have to figure out what was really awful as Blair. But I actually saw it recently

to avoid and what not to let yourself get lost in. It can



ELLIS: Sure, it was fun. But it was fun because you're young and you're in New York. I really didn't move to New York to be closer to any literary establishment. It was more that when I was a kid growing up in Southern California, I saw New York as something very special, very golden. I always had a desire to move there and probably would have done so whether I'd published Less Than Zero or not. That was always the plan: to get to New York. I just wasn't as enamored of Los Angeles at that time and at that age as most of my peers were. Most everyone I went to high school with ended up staying in Los Angeles. I was definitely the first person in my high school's history to go to Bennington.

BOLLEN: A lot of the character motivation in Imperial Bedrooms rests on fame-the need to gain it beyond all other human motivations. I suppose whenever vou write about actors, it's always going to involve the drive for fame.

ELLIS: But people can create their own kind of fame with tech now. You can set up websites devoted to yourself. You can very easily live out that visual fantasy of yourself as famous. What may be different is that with such a culture of immediate gratification, the desire to actually move your ass, become talented at something, and then try to succeed at something like acting or singing or dancing is no longer necessary. Sometimes you watch those elimination rounds on shows like American Idol and wonder, "Do people

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Continued from page 83¬ working on a novel—that I were like Chuck Palahniuk and had the career that he has. These writers seem to be kept very busy. But I don't work that way. People laugh when they see this book, which is about as long as a movie script. I tinkered around with Imperial Bedrooms for three or four vears, and it's about 40,000 words. That's kind of nuts. But you can't will a novel. I spend a lot of time pacing, a lot of time checking e-mail. I've never had that experience of a full year of intense creative writing. It always stops and starts, stops and starts.

BOLLEN: I know you've been writing a screenplay about the deaths of Jeremy Blake and Theresa Duncan. A lot of people in the art world seemed nervous about your handling of the subject—as they often are when a broader audience fixates on one of their own. But do you know that some artists in New York believe that Jeremy and Theresa actually were murdered in a conspiracy, perhaps organized by Scientologists? It's not the prevailing opinion, but I have heard that. Then there is the more accepted belief that Theresa had serious mental problems and led Jeremy down a dark road.

ELLIS: I completely agree with that last assessment. I think that's the story. I'm not attracted to the story if it was a conspiracy. That doesn't interest me at all. What interests me about the story is what happens when you fall in love with someone. You get lost in the other person's world. And when they go, then what do vou do? It's a project I've been working on for a couple of years now, and it's haunting to me—not because of Theresa Duncan's death but because of Jeremy's. And the movie is really about him. It's his story. We start with him early on, and then he meets her. It's sort of an unraveling. But I also wanted to subvert the usual biopic.

BOLLEN: Are they just a template, or is it really the

Jeremy Blake-Theresa Duncan story? ELLIS: I want it to be about them. It would be great to use Jeremy's art, but that is so far down the road. Gus is overseeing the script. But we'll see what happens. I'm haunted by that story, although I didn't know either one of them

BOLLEN: There's something really fascinating about one person's madness leading you down that hole and when they die, you end up going with them of your own volition.

ELLIS: That, to me, is what happens when we fall in love. Your world becomes theirs and vice versa. I think people have been worried that the movie would be a salacious, gossipy piece, but it's really an incredibly sympathetic take on what happened. I have no urge to mock them. Theresa had a lot of problems in Hollywood, which, by the way, everyone does. But if you're really unstable, I can understand how it would drive you to madness. BOLLEN: Yeah.

ELLIS: I think that was happening with me at the time with The Informers. And I was involved in a relationship with someone who was crazy as well, so it all came together for me when the first articles on them were published.

BOLLEN: Well, there is also a lot of paranoia going on in Imperial Bedrooms-this idea of always being followed and filmed and spied on. I'm not saying that you're crazy.

ELLIS: I admit it! When I was first living in Los the first before the second state of the secon spectrum in the second sufficient second Angeles four years ago, there were a couple of events and exceptions from a supplementary pairs in sectors and income and the sector and that made me quite paranoid. Maybe that's also The figure part of the to the billion representative property in Associations and Table what attracted me to their story: They move to Los of an annual particular share, but it was also had bewhy may be shared at a Angeles, where the unraveling begins. Reading Multi-law second and it fitted in the classifier. 14.1.4. Now, any special ran why has inference when BOLLEN: When I started reading Imperial Bedrooms, and the second second I was wondering if you'd give any of your Less Than statistic free birth have the success way todal Wile interface effort descent sharp research Zero characters a happy future—or ending. Although in state a constant de maybe the end of Less Than Zero itself might be intercontrol in the include on help property of Children Jack Christ, Human State and Article party of preted as something of a happy ending because Clay is it as integration which has a loss that have anter all brough also also and the state of the gets awav. en die Dragen, belie de se ber riter i nariettig sansiaise.

ELLIS: What if I removed the last three words, *after* CONTROL First, Fig. 20 Incomparison, Fig. Street, *I left*? That has haunted me a lot. Would the meaning prove Microsovice for Library supervision surfaces. of the book be different? I don't know. Yeah, there is tale resultant, any of Michaels are being faca little ray of hope at the end of that book. ally see in the insertion and the other schedule (in-BOLLEN: But you didn't want to write any of the in heaving but which its here full a heaving of a descention. characters as turning out happy or satisfied in *Imperial* the Children States Bedrooms? Obviously they are financially successful, second and a second second but I wouldn't call them successful in life. and the second second second and the south the second second second ELLIS: I don't really tend to look at life that way. to such any particular on the property changes. Does the point of whether those kids were happy or and its frameworks. I this see it will be sad have any relation to the book? What does that even mean? I never thought that mattered. When to help I have providing a strength of the second s I look at a list of characters, I'm not asking myself, control to the hereafted and ing on all however "Were they ever happy?" which assistently provide the respective proce-BOLLEN: Okay. consider. They requirely house the pill Well &

ELLIS: I mean, the whole time I've been talking to signate result of Highway, "Kay an electron proyou, I've gotten a sense of some nostalgia. I sense d'encodes, have been annot the second some need in you to be searching for what we aspire to. But I'm not even thinking in those terms when control. History in pippo reporter dat comparing the last start for all the surface. I'm writing a novel. 1100

BOLLEN: I was just wondering if there was any other version of events that could have played out for these children of privileged Los Angeles to grow into any other reality. ELLIS: No. They are stuck in my universe.

BOLLEN: You have the final say here. ELLIS: It's the only place I have any control. BOLLEN: Are you working on another novel right now?

when have the first straight and a burgelongs for entrony. Died like prophone the Tradictory and the contracts the second share been related for being ELLIS: I'm done with the novels. I mean, if it hapbeamshing on the second sections. When or preventing sheet." While prove many sold." pens, great. But right now I see my life drifting toward black, but more that one and wall which makes take movies and television. Unless I really want to write has not been been been a water because interchedrologic description with approach the and one, I'm not going to force myself. That sounds like institute and the probability of the when investigated when invites, when it is inviting and a nightmare to me. To force yourself to write a novel have take approved the part is reaching in well. Appl odari ren, baite gorele è gole e reditio. just to put one out seems crazy and impossible. where we and a subscription provide the subscription CARDO For all yok with reading charts

BOLLEN: I guess you'll be staying out in Los Angeles, then, and not coming back to New York. ELLIS: I really think New York is over, man. L.A. is the future. It's much more cutting edge than New

York, I'm sorry. Yeah, it has an immense doucheness to it. It does. But also, the cool parts are so much cooler than New York right now. I think New York's really old-school. I can't explain it. That's just where I'm at. And also. I don't believe that whole idea that if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere. If you survive L.A. and get over that initial hurdle, then you can make it anywhere.

BOLLEN: So L.A. is tougher than New York?

ELLIS: Yeah, it's a much more brutal place. L.A. does not allow you to reinvent yourself. L.A.—because of the way it's spaced out and its geography and isolation—forces you to become who you really are. [*laughs*] Now, a lot of people become really awful people out here. But that's who they really are. L.A. just won't let you reinvent yourself. Other cities do that—New York, maybe Paris and London, But L.A.? Forget about it. All bets are off.

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