

Violent novel fuss not censorship issue

"Oh, honey. The things I could do to your eyes with a coat hanger."
— Bret Easton Ellis, "American Psycho."

Once upon a time, there was a young, famous novelist named Bret Easton Ellis who graduated from Bennington College. This young famous novelist wrote a novel called "Less Than Zero" about the perils of restless youth living in the fast lane of too much sex and drugs and not enough love in Los Angeles. The novel was praised by critics nationwide as a masterpiece, and its author as a novelist of the first order.

Several years later, after writing another book about overprivileged, unhappy young adults that didn't do as well ("The Rules of Attraction"), Ellis wrote another novel, this one supposed to be a scathing critique of American life today.

Titled "American Psycho," this novel was about a twenty-something yuppie investment banker by day, serial killer by night who gets his kicks in his spare time by committing acts of violence against women, children and the homeless in New York. When not tracking the future of pork bellies, Patrick Bateman bites the breasts off his victims, skins them, attacks them with nail guns, and, in one especially notorious sequence, inserts a starving rat into a woman's body — the better for it to gnaw its way free.

Like all successful authors in fairy tales, Ellis had a respectable publisher, Simon and Schuster. Everything was going happily until this fall, when bad fairies in the form of *Spy* and *Time* magazines printed excerpts from the novel.

The public reacted with horror. U.S. News & World Report's John Leo call the book "totally hateful — in effect, a how-to manual on the torture and dismemberment of women."

The outrage was so great that Simon and Schuster's CEO decided to cancel publication, a month before "American Psycho" was to be shipped to bookstores.

Ellis was shocked. So was his literary agent. The Authors Guild got into the fray, charging censorship.

But the story had a happy ending, after all. Within 48 hours of Simon and Schuster's decision, Alfred A. Knopf's Vintage Books announced that it would publish "Psycho" as a trade paperback in early 1991. "American Psycho" is scheduled to appear on bookshelves any day now.

Article after article has appeared on the book since the controversy began. Some publications, like the *New York Times Book Review* and many women's magazines, have blasted "American Psycho" and advocated its boycott. In return, *Publishers Weekly*, the Authors Guild and Ellis himself have levelled charges of censorship against Simon and Schuster for refusing to publish "American Psycho."

Comparisons of "American Psycho" to the 2 Live Crew controversy, the Robert Mapplethorpe trial and the NEA funding for the arts dispute have abounded.

Some critics claim "American Psycho," like explicit rap lyrics, is a disgusting attack against women. Some argue that the novel itself is terrible, being nothing more than 362 pages full of designer labels, violence, no



William Rudolph

character development and no plot.

But whatever the reasons for disliking it, the question remains: Is the fuss about publishing "American Psycho" another example of censorship in the 1990s?

No. When Cincinnati curator Dennis Barrie is put on trial for exhibiting Robert Mapplethorpe's nudes, that is censorship. When a federal agency denies an artist grant money because of "immoral" or "objectionable" art according to so-called community standards, that is censorship. When a rap group is arrested on obscenity charges and a Florida record seller is indicted for hawking the group's records, that is most definitely censorship.

But no one is preventing Ellis from marketing his so-called "critique" of American society. Publishing is a business, not a federal agency. Although Simon and Schuster refused to publish "American Psycho," Vintage Books quickly came to the novelist's rescue.

Ellis even stands to make half a million dollars from his ordeal in combined advances, not to mention the sales all of the controversy undoubtedly will generate. After all, there's nothing like a big juicy scandal to get the American public salivating (and the dollars flying out of wallets).

No one, furthermore, is issuing death threats against Ellis. His reputation may have been damaged, but his advances should help buy tissues to mop up any tears of self-pity — unlike Salman Rushdie, who still lives in hiding two years after publication of "The Satanic Verses."

And even if every commercial publishing house decided to "snuff" Ellis' novel, as the *New York Times Book Review* urged, Ellis still could unleash his disgusting excuse for fiction upon us all through a vanity press.

This is America, after all. If you've got the money, you can print your Uncle Ralph's remembrances of growing up on an ostrich farm or even a do-it-yourself guide to torturing women, children and the homeless.

I do not plan to read "American Psycho." I have better ways to spend my money. Quite frankly, I'd much rather waste my time perusing the side of a cereal box. At least I might learn something constructive.

But, to paraphrase Voltaire, you have every right to buy Ellis' book, every right to read it — and I will fight with my dying breath to let you have the chance to make up your own mind about it, regardless of what I think about it.

Once that book is published, if someone tries to prevent you from buying or being able to read "American Psycho," then that is censorship — and that is not only unacceptable, but evil.

Ultimately, the whole stink about "American Psycho" comes down to something more serious than censorship or freedom of speech.

The disturbing thing about "American Psycho" is not the violence it

depicts. Not the starving rat sequence. Not even Ellis' justification in the novel's press release for creating a manuscript full of designer labels and serial killers biting off their victims' breasts:

"I don't think it's a novelist's job to give little moral lessons."

The disturbing thing is that the manuscript was ever accepted in the first place.

If "American Psycho" had been written by an unknown author, it wouldn't have gotten past the slush pile on the first assistant reader's desk.

Novels do not come out overnight. Yet throughout all the editorial meetings, all the work involved in bringing a book to press, no one apparently stopped to ask themselves, "Do we want to be associated with this book? Do we want to be held responsible for producing, promoting and condoning a work like this?"

Why didn't Simon and Schuster cancel publication of the novel before the popular press got a whiff of the content of "American Psycho"? What does the fact that Vintage Books still plans to publish it, even after all the controversy and bad publicity, indicate about us?

What does it say about American society today that Bret Easton Ellis could conceive of this idea, have the nerve to commit it to paper and sell it for a combined total of half a million dollars? And that we, the American public, will undoubtedly buy it?

The answer is not very pleasant.

William Rudolph is a senior English major and Daily Nebraskan arts and entertainment reporter and columnist.

Texas polka band not all Polish dogs and beer

By Robert Richardson
Senior Reporter

Imagine a polka band from Texas, with traditional brass, accordion and percussion beats, that started playing in mental institutions.

After he graduated from art school, Carl Finch's friends asked him what he was going to do. He said he was going to form a "nuclear polka band"

and play mental institutions.

In 1979, Finch did just that as Brave Combo appeared on the Texas polka scene.

Having just released their eighth record, "A Night On Earth," Brave Combo will be coming to the Zoo Bar, 136 N. 14th St. on Monday night.

You won't hear the "Beer Barrel Polka" on their latest release, "A Night On Earth," but you will hear plenty of diversity.

Brave Combo's versatile vocalist and horns player, Jeffrey Barnes, said the band tries to do different things because that fits in with its current interests.

"We do quite a variety of things as we've been real interested in music of other cultures as ethnomusicology," Barnes said. "All of us have kind of gotten into it in various and sundry ways."

Barnes said even though Brave

Combo does some different things, they really like the basic polka sound. And being from Texas, they have noticed similarities between Mexico and the United States.

"American Polish polka is something that we like a lot," Barnes said. "Polkas have become a part of Mexican culture in a number of different ways."

"Do Something Different" is a

perfect example of Chicago polka, Barnes said. The fast-paced tempo coupled with the strong brass sound and piano bring in a light-hearted feeling to a room. The vocals in a hearty scratch sing, "do something different . . . disappear." This brings back memories of weddings, beer and Polish dogs.

Brave Combo will be at the Zoo Bar Monday at 9 p.m. Cover is \$4.

Record

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president of Doctor Dream Records in Orange, Calif.

"We're coming at it from a survival standpoint," Hayes said. "We're not going to shoot our wad and then not be around next year."

Hayes said the recession could "probably have a positive effect" for some record labels, because "a lot of labels are dropping bands, so there are some great bands available for signing." Many groups from major labels may lose their recording contracts if the recession is prolonged, Hayes said, and that's good news for the independent labels.

"A lot of groups, once they've been on the main track and found out what it's all about, and they're in debt for \$300,000, they realize that independent labels offer a way to survive," Hayes said. "I'm actually looking forward to the recession."

According to Jonathan Poneman, however, most independent labels aren't interested in picking up acts that have been dropped by other labels. Poneman is co-owner of the Seattle-based Sub Pop Records.

"As far as I'm concerned, a band that has gone on to a major label, they're basically stiffed. What we're interested in is something more than a pop act. Now, if Van Morrison were to get dropped, sure, we may try to pick him up. But of course he's not going to get dropped because of a recession," Poneman said.

"My opinion," he said, "is that if a band can't make it through large distribution, it bespeaks of a greater lack of market momentum, so we're not interested."

Poneman did admit that "there's great business sense to doing that (signing a band that was dropped), if you can get someone that transcends

mere pop product. But in terms of the currency of the independent record profession, we're looking for new faces, new names, new concepts. If you start trying to pump life into a band that blew its wad years ago, forget it."

Hayes said the independent recording industry can thrive during a recession "because we sell quantities the retail merchant can still afford."

In addition to the ease with which retailers can acquire independent releases, Hayes said, independent labels offer attractive packages to good artists.

"The difference between us and Geffen, for instance, is that we can make and market an album for between \$20,000 and \$50,000, and they can make and market one for between \$200 and \$500,000 per album," he said.

"Sales of 50,000 records to me, I'd be jumping through the roof," Hayes said. "Whereas with a major label, that would be a complete failure. That's the attraction of the independent scene. We're self-contained."

Poneman said he can respect the major record labels' drive to maximize sales and increase volume. "At that level, with Warner Bros. and the others, that's what they're all about. I mean, Coca-Cola tries to bottle and sell as many bottles of Coke as they can each day. But we don't see our bands as being just so much product."

Sub Pop's strategy for overcoming the recession is "to always evaluate the bottom line, one way or the other," said Poneman. But the mission of the company overrides the desire for big financial gains.

"We don't have a plan to stop signing new acts," he said. "Frankly, it's easier to sign new acts than feed a big hungry beast of an act we helped to create."

"The old Warhol 15-minute quote is essentially true. Popular culture eats its young, as it were, and the acid

test for us is simply whether or not a band has something to say," Poneman said.

Paula Jeffries, president of Gold Castle Records in Los Angeles, took a realistic view of overcoming the recession.

"We look at the situation very realistically and on a day-to-day basis," Jeffries said. She added that Gold Castle Records is not looking to sign a high number of artists who may be searching for contracts or "take any big financial gambles" during the recession.

"It's kind of hard to project at this point," Jeffries said of the impact of the recession. "But we have always tried to be quite frugal, and we will maintain that strategy."

Gold Castle releases are distributed by major labels; Jeffries declined to mention the labels' names.

Jeffries said, "but we have some specialty products that we distribute independently into stores that wouldn't otherwise carry music, like bookstores that carry New Age selections, for instance."

The recession has had an impact on the company, according to Jeffries, but only "to the degree that I think we've been building slowly towards this for about two years now."

Retailers have "generally bought stock for up to 12 weeks in advance, but now they're down to purchasing what they need for the next eight days, and re-ordering in between to fill stock," Jeffries said.

"Certain products are still certainly moving," Jeffries said, "but the volume is more closely regulated."

Overall, record companies executives expressed optimism about their ability to endure a recession, and, as Darrel Anderson, promotional director of Hightone Records in Oakland, said, "as far as I'm concerned, it's not really going to have a highly adverse impact. It shouldn't really affect us."

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