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Ellis' 'Lunar Park': cut-rate horror

By Lizzie Skurnick

Special To The Sun

Originally published August 21, 2005

Lunar Park, By Bret Easton Ellis. Alfred A. Knopf. 308 pages.

Bret Easton Ellis needs no introduction. Not because his first novel, *Less Than Zero*, was a "zeitgeist touchstone," or because he has been profiled in "every magazine and newspaper that existed," or because his name is as

"recognizable as most movie stars' or athletes'."

No, it is because, for those of you who may not be aware of these facts, the author notes all of the above and more in his handy 30-page preface to *Lunar Park*, which constitutes his sixth novel, or, if you will, a gathering of "controlled, cinematic haiku."

But as we page through this memoir-cum-lit lesson - a compendium of abuse, both moral and venal, that barely masks the author's outrage at his good fortune - or check out the online resources available for our perusal

([www.twobrets.com](#), where the author discourses further on the work, or [www.jaynedennis.com](#), a Web site for the author's glamorous wife), we begin to feel that something may be amiss. The "Two Brets" thing? Hmmm. Jayne Dennis' inexplicably chintzy site, wherein she resembles nothing so much as a bobble-headed Bratz doll? Weird. Jay McInerney the Jerry Lewis to Ellis' Sinatra? Hold it right there.

Turns out, Ellis' confessions are not only semi-ersatz (how semi, we don't know; Jayne and her kids are definitely fake, though), but are meant to function as an old-fashioned lead-up to a ghost story with - Boo! -the author at the center. Ellis, one of whose Bret's admits to a taste for Stephen King, has pilfered one of the master's favorite plots: the author destroyed by his own creations.

During the course of the novel, Bret is haunted by none other than *Less Than Zero's* Clayton, *American Psycho's* Patrick Bateman, monsters from various childhood sketches, and, most terrifyingly, Jay McInerney, who will not stop showing up at parties. Now it's clear why we needed to know that

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Bateman was based on Ellis' own father, that, jonesing on a book tour, the author became convinced that a Baltimore bookstore owner was a mountain lion, and that *Less Than Zero* was an "indictment ... of the Reagan eighties and, more indirectly, of Western civilization in the present moment." Class dismissed.

Still, this is literature, and we must apprehend that it is ultimately Ellis' character, not characters, that plague him. (Cliff Notes version: Bret is Haunted by Himself.) But here, Ellis might have taken another page from King. When an author thrusts himself into the center of his own narrative, he's making the bet that readers will find him as interesting as anything he can make up.

Unfortunately, Bret at the typewriter wheel, airless and affected though he may be, is far more compelling than Bret on the page - who, pre-haunting, is either downing half a bottle of Ketel One or weeping into his Frette sheets, apparently tortured by an adherence to brand names unrivaled by that of *Sex and the City*. With Ellis' fictional characters, the signifying Wayfarers and other rampant label-dropping were meant to stand in stark contrast to the characters' emotional poverty. But when it's the author himself, we're hard-pressed to see why a marble bathroom evolves "into a symbol of [his] precariousness in the world."

Who would have thought the '80s heir to Hemingway, with his tough, terse prose and bad-boy facade, could turn out such a cut-rate horror, such overwrought self-mythology? Which is to say, was it necessary to split Bret in two for the fictional half to declare the mortal an ass? "You do a pretty good imitation of yourself," begins both the first and second chapter of *Lunar Park* - first, as Bret's rumination on what might constitute a good first line; next, as Jayne's disgusted comment about Bret. Only of one thing we can be sure: He does a terrible Stephen King.

Lizzie Skurnick is the editor of *Old Hag*, a literary blog.

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