

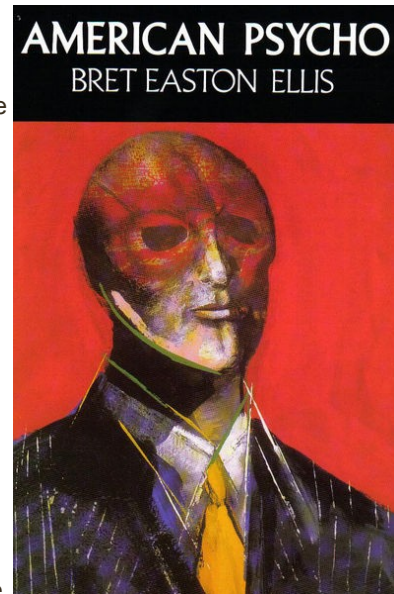
Book/Movie Review: American Psycho

Posted by [Midnight](#) on November 11th, 2006

I recently finished reading American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis. My interest in the book was spurred by the movie, which I have watched both before and after reading the book. I think that both mediums are excellent works of fiction. I first heard of the movie in Iraq when one of my Marines on the night shift told me that my dry sense of humor reminded him of Christian Bale in American Psycho. I then downloaded the movie from our movie server and watched it. I was immediately gripped by the brutally honest look at 80's "yuppie" culture. I appreciate honesty, possibly to a fault. I'm a guy that doesn't make excuses for not attending events. If I'm not planning on going to a party I am more than happy to tell the host that I appreciate the invitation, but I am simply not up for it. I don't make up stories of possible family commitments, taking animals to the vet, and other malformed tippy-toe face-saving excuses. I enjoy the same treatment in kind. The point of that aside is that it's difficult to get people to be honest, especially about anything that will be released into American popular culture (a film). When I noticed that the writer/director was really telling me the truth about not only a normal person, but an actual sociopath, someone whom I have only minimal understanding of, I was hooked.

In retrospect, the film is almost a 1:1 adaptation of the book. Even more masterfully, events that couldn't be easily put onto film (Bateman's diatribes on music, clothing, and electronics) are molded into scenes which are out of place in the context of the book, but work to provide a more comprehensive picture of Bateman, further expounding on the main theme of the book. I also view the book as a satire on 80's materialism and the culture that emerged when the wealthy was no longer limited to those over 40. Warning: The following paragraphs contain spoilers.

Patrick Bateman works on Wall Street at a brokerage firm called Pierce & Pierce. I use the term "work" loosely, because he doesn't really have any responsibility. His job is chiefly for his own satisfaction of helping him to fit-in. He normally reads magazines, listens to music, and takes long lunches with friends. However, when his fiancé, Evelyn, asks for his time or discusses getting married Bateman is quick to exclaim that he can't take the time off work. Bateman is both a superb and a dreadfully poor liar. He delivers falsehoods with cold candor, but often uses ridiculous or impossible excuses. Bateman's standard reason for having to suddenly leave is always "I have to return some videotapes." It



becomes a classic line throughout the book and the film. Bateman and his friends are obsessed with appearance—mainly clothing. Bateman always introduces a scene by listing the people present and describing in exact detail every stitch of their clothing from shoes to tie tacks. Eating out consumes a great deal of every day for Bateman and his friends. His day is centered on his lunch and dinner appointments, how classy the restaurant may be, and whether he has a reservation or not. Bateman keeps a Zagat restaurant guide handy both in his office and at home. He only eats at the finest restaurants. The bill is usually measured in hundreds of dollars per person. He and his friends are also very sexist and somewhat racist. They slur and slander blacks, Jews, Italians, Irish, Asians, and others, but their own ethnic persuasions are never fully revealed. Curiously, Bateman sometimes tries to mitigate his friends' racist remarks, but it is only for image. They also refer to women exclusively as “hardbodies.” If a woman isn't a hardbody, you get the impression she's not worth mentioning, and that is made obvious in several conversations. They also use cocaine but berate marijuana users. Bateman himself also has a dark side.

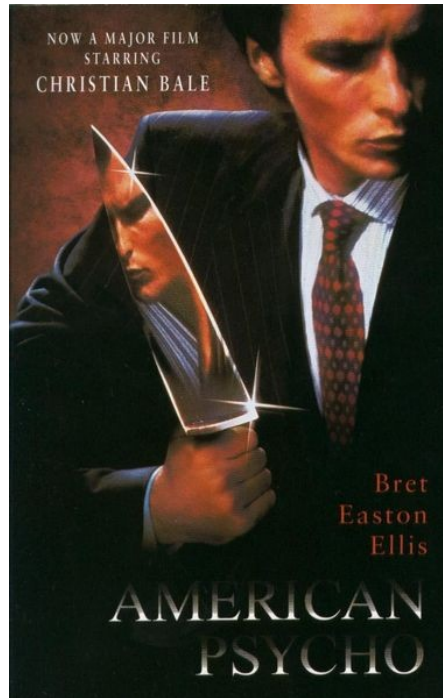
Below the comic relief and the satire of 80's popular culture is a deep look at the person of Patrick Bateman. Bateman is miserable. I don't think the movie conveys this fact as well as the book, but Bateman repeatedly refers to his life as “a living hell.” He is only truly happy and only feels “real” when he is torturing and murdering people. Bateman tells us that his normal life is excruciating, and he is only content for the brief time that he is indulging in a murderous escapade. What a curse it must be to have to murder just for contentment—not glee or indulgence—just contentment and a feeling of reality. Bateman is also obsessive. He obsesses over very strange and miniscule items such as where his table sits in a restaurant or whether he has the best business card among his friends. While the movie makes mention of this, it doesn't really drive home the fact that he is truly obsessing over these things. In the movie when Bateman is quoted as saying “I'm on the verge of tears as I'm certain we won't get a decent table...” he is actually upset and on the verge of tears. Several times in the book he experiences panic attacks, only a couple of which are portrayed in the movie. He sometimes vomits and often breaks out in cold sweats over his obsessions. In several of his panic attacks he is able to calm himself by purchasing tools to use in his murders such as axes, knives, and nail guns.

Bateman is in pain, and he wants to inflict that pain on others. He enjoys mixing sex with murder and most of his victims are women. He repeatedly rents the movie *Body Double* to masturbate to a scene where a woman is killed with a power drill. He often uses a nail gun in his murders. In one scene in the movie Bateman attempts to kill Jean, his secretary, with a nail gun, but cannot. He then tells Jean she should leave so she doesn't get hurt. Jean interprets this as avoiding the emotional pain of an eventual breakup, but Bateman is quite literal. In the book, he actually says this to a random “hardbody” he met and had sex with.

Bateman shows a clear but strange tendency: he cannot kill those who love him. Both Jean, his secretary, and Luis Carruthers, a homosexual he despises, love him. He tries to murder both, but fails to follow through. Evelyn, his fiancé, also may love him, but he never seriously tries to murder Evelyn, to my recollection. Bateman is also delusional (could you have guessed?). He gets increasingly more delusional as the book progresses, and the reader begins to question the authenticity of his murderous stories. In one of the final chapters he remarks that a "park bench followed him home," among other crazy things. Also, during the exposition of his murder of an old college girlfriend Ellis inserts the text "but I'm really just dreaming this" without pause or punctuation into the middle of the story. In the end, the legitimacy of Bateman's tales is left to the reader to decide.

In the final chapters Ellis also presents more monologues from Bateman on the nature of his psychosis. These are extremely interesting and I will reprint one here without abridgement.

"...there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: I am simple not there. It is hard for me to make sense on any given level. Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a non contingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent. My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared along time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist. There are no more barriers to cross. All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed. I still, though, hold on to one single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed. Yet I am blameless. Each model of human behavior must be assumed to have some validity. Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do? My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape. But even after admitting this-and I have, countless times, in just about every act I've committed-and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling. There has been no reason for me to tell you any of this. This confession has meant nothing..."



In an effort to understand the culture of extravagance, style, and wealth that Bateman lives in, I picked up a copy of Esquire at Barnes and Noble a few nights ago. It reviewed and advertised \$900 Oxford cap-toed shoes, \$25,000 watches, and \$1400 wool topcoats. Amusingly, when reviewing one tuxedo it mentioned a small nuance that would set the wearer apart from others. The article then said something to the effect of "... and when swimming in a room of identically dressed men, that's always a plus." I laughed out loud, as that is a major theme of American Psycho. All the men are constantly mistaking the identities of all the other men. No one can tell each other apart. They all have the same outfits, haircuts, and tendencies. How interesting the same ideas are as applicable in 2006 as in 1991.

The picture that Bret Easton Ellis paints in American Psycho is as disturbing as it is enlightening, but I get the feeling that it is the bitter truth. Never before have I been able to explore the mind of a true sociopath. Because of the book's brutal honesty, I also began to examine my own thoughts and wonder what impact passing thoughts have on reality. Do we all have some miniscule level of psychosis, and the preponderance of the population is simply able to suppress it? I don't know, but had I never read American Psycho, I wouldn't have thought to ask, and that makes all the difference.

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Reader Comments

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1

Written by:

Joe

Posted on:

November 12th, 2006 at 1:45 pm

Very interesting, I've never read/seen it but I'll look for it at the library now.

Comment:

2

Written by:

Janet

Posted on:

November 12th, 2006 at 6:02 pm

Extremely well written review of a truly chilling book/movie. The dust cover/poster are incredible - my kudos to the graphic artist. The truth - I will take your word for it and pass on something which is too much for this reading/watching enthusiast. Your analysis, is from all aspects, among the best I have ever ready.

Comment:

3

Written by:

[KC](#)

Posted on:

November 12th, 2006 at 9:15 pm

Per your recommendation, I went and rented the movie last night. It was chilling. I love psychological thrillers like that.

Your review (as well as the rest of your writing) was great! You've been one of my favorite blogs for awhile, and will continue to be for awhile. :)

Comment:

4

Written by:

[AndyM](#)

Posted on:

November 14th, 2006 at 4:58 pm

First, let me thank you for your interesting entries. I have been reading the site for several months and hope that you will continue to produce milblog material far into the future. Your perspective on the Iraq situation is a valuable resource.

Second:

>>>I recently finished reading American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis. My interest in the book was spurred by the movie...

Spurred or sparked? :)

V/R,

AndyM

Comment:

5

Written by:

[Midnight](#)

Posted on:

November 14th, 2006 at 10:07 pm

Andy, it's supposed to be "spurred." Thanks for the catch.

Comment:

6

Written by:

Oculus

Posted on:

November 15th, 2006 at 2:46 pm

Good review. It's interesting that you should review this just now, as we have been talking about it at work lately. I actually just took the rental back last week. It appears that there has been a surge of interest in this movie as we look back at the late 80's and early 90's and remember the material culture prevalent then. I try to think to myself how things are different now, I do remember the overwhelming urge to fit in by buying certain brands of clothing, wearing them a certain way. Maybe I feel less inclined to do so these days. The business card scenes were fantastic though.

Comment:

7

Written by:

Donna, Los Osos, CA

Posted on:

November 16th, 2006 at 12:57 pm

Hi Midnight,

A while back I was referred to a non-fiction book called "Without Conscious" because I was dealing with a

sociopath. Your last paragraph is interesting. In my reflections on what makes someone “that way”, I pondered the same thing. I concluded that while outside forces can influence the degree of a sociopath’s behavior, the bottom line is, the light in their conscious is just not lite. We will never be able to understand the way they think. To them, everything in the world is just a mirror, and everything they see, think, and feel, is about them.

I will probably pass on reading the book or seeing the movie. Had enough of sociopaths. Always enjoy your writing though!! Take care.

Comment:

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Written by:

Melissa Regier

Posted on:

November 21st, 2006 at 9:10 am

I saw this movie when it came out in theaters, and didn’t really get it. A few months ago a friend recommended that I watch it again. To his disappointment, I still was not impressed. I had a kind of “so what?” reaction to it. But after reading your review, I think I’ve finally seen the genius of the story. Kudos on an amazing review! I’m going to forward this to my friend and see what he thinks.

Finally, this is the first time I’ve posted on your blog, even though I’ve been reading it for a few months now. I really enjoyed reading about your experience in Iraq. It’s not often that we are able to get a look at what life is like out there. Thank you so much for taking the time to do that, and thank you thank you thank you for your service! I appreciate it more than I can say! :) God Bless!

Comment:

9

Written by:

[Xanthippas](#)

Posted on:

November 21st, 2006 at 1:13 pm

Great review. I’ve seen the movie, which I enjoyed, but haven’t read the book yet. I think it’s time to pick up a copy.

