

Bret Easton Ellis

The Shards

by Joost de Vries

Obviously, it's always such a cliché to start by saying: 'Our next guest needs no introduction.' I was thinking differently this time, and I am going to start by saying: 'Our next guest needs a Greatest Hits album.'

I'm not kidding. It would be a great idea to make a Bret Easton Ellis reader, a textbook with fragments of his novels and essays, for students in literature, and students in contemporary history.

What Joan Didion did for the sixties and seventies, Bret Easton Ellis did for the eighties and nineties. What Don DeLillo did with themes as terrorism and mass media and conspiracy theories, Bret Easton Ellis did with celebrity culture, serial killers, consumerism and hedonism. In the same way that John Updike chronicled man's longing quest for pleasure and meaning, Bret Easton Ellis chronicles man's struggle with a surplus of pleasure and a lack of meaning.

He is a writer whose style makes the horrible sound attractive and makes the attractive sound horrible.

So: if you were to make a Bret Easton Ellis Greatest Hits album, one would obviously start with *Less Than Zero*, the generation X-defining novel from the mid-eighties. Then, you'd try and escape California, and visit his characters in *The Informers* and *Rules of Attraction* - and you'd see that even on the East coast, his characters are stuck in their pleasureless hedonistic lifestyle. Next you'd reach peak grim satire, with one of the classics not just of the nineties, but a classic of pretty much the last fifty years of literature, the scandal that was *American Psycho*.

Up next in the BEE Reader would be fragments from the ridiculously cool, celebrities-infested *Glamorama*, followed by *Lunar Park* and *Imperial Bedrooms*, novels that sees the IT-boys and girls age and try (and fail) to settle down.

If you were to compile such a Greatest Hits album, you'd see how Mr. Ellis' stories feed into each other, how subplots in one book become dramas in the next, how Mr. Ellis keeps broadening his horizon. Such a Greatest Hits Album would also include, for example, Mr. Ellis' amazing essay on the very public breakdown of Charlie Sheen – a vital text that shows how celebrities have become the defining characteristic of the failing American empire.

But then something strange happens. Once you'd reach the most recent part of The Greatest Hits, you'd stumble upon Mr. Ellis' newest novel: *The Shards*. It's a bit silly to say 'this book changes everything'. But it does. The book opens a whole new window with a whole new perspective on Mr. Ellis' work.

*The Shards* takes us back to 1981, where a certain high school senior called Bret Ellis is busy writing his debut novel, called ... *Less Than Zero*. Sounds familiar? It's 1981, it's Los Angeles, Bel Air, the kids drive sport cars, wear Wayfarer sunglasses, have abs and cheekbones that can cut glass.

Bret is in a relationship with the glamorous Debbie, is best friends with Susan and Thom, the type of persons who are too easily crowned as prom king and queen. They're young, rich, they do coke, have sex, listen to Ultrafox' 'Vienna', go out and see 'Chariots of Fire', have lunch in restaurants crowded by filmstars.

It may sound like *Less Than Zero* – but it's not.

Where *Less Than Zero* blocks out all emotions, *The Shards* lets them in. All of them. And then all of a sudden you find that the kids aren't all right – they aren't jaded, careless, world-weary spoiled little rich kids. They care. They are insecure. They are smart, and funny, and ambitious. They love each other and they worry. In Bret's case: he worries that people find out he's been having affairs with not one but two guys, he worries that his girlfriend will find out, he worries about what it would do to the way he's perceived.

*The Shards* fills the void that *Less Than Zero* left us with. Don't get me wrong: *Less Than Zero* is a hell of a book, but *The Shards* brings it to a whole other level. I did not expect to read the 600 pages as fast as I did, but the book – as the cool kids say – is a whole mood. It's a page turner.

I've been reading Mr. Ellis' work pretty much ever since I've been reading books. Before today, Mr. Ellis and I met once. It was over 18 years ago, I believe in 2005. We met for a full sixteen seconds – I was in line to get my book signed, at Scheltema. I don't recall what I said to him when it was my turn, besides 'It's spelled J double O S T', but I do remember what the people in line in front of me said. They asked if they could take a picture with him. Mr. Ellis kindly agreed. But then, when they wanted to take the shot, he said – 'Wait, stop', and he turned and said 'This is my good side.'

And I swear to God, ever since, every time someone wants to take my picture, or any time a photographer says 'Let's do something fun', I stop and think: *What would Bret Easton Ellis do?*

So let's ask him.

Please give a warm welcome to Mr. Bret Easton Ellis.