

Fear and clothing in Los Angeles

By GILLIAN McCAIN

BRETT EASTON ELLIS'S first attempt at a novel, *Less Than Zero* (Simon & Schuster, 1985) is as Pop as a Warhol Brillo box or a Tom Wolfe article. Pop as Batman. Pop as a tart. Pop. Pop. Pop.

Bam. Pow. Shazam.

Gertrude Stein once said something in the 20's about the 'lost generation'. Well, the kids in California are still lost, man. Only now in a Pop sort of way.

The narrator of the story is named Clay (Hey, for all you non-English majors out there who haven't been taught to look for, uh, hummm, 'subtle' symbolism, perhaps the author chose the name 'Clay' because that stuff is pretty malleable and impressionable and uh, you know, moldable, right? In this case Silly Putty would have been slightly more appropriate). Clay is a Pop kind of guy with a Pop sort of ex-girlfriend who indulges in a lot of Pop culture and lives in the epitome of a Pop city. Clay has blonde hair. So does his friend Trent, who is a male model. His ex-girlfriend Blair does, too. Blair's father is a movie producer who left Blair's Mom for a male waiter from one of Blair's favorite eateries. Blair goes to U.S.C. (the 'University of Spoiled Children' as she so aptly describes it). Blair still loves Clay. Clay (or, S.P. for short) doesn't still love Blair. And, as Frank Sinatra sings, "Unrequited love is such a bore..."

So is this novel.

After the reader is introduced to all of these wonderful people we meet Muriel, the anorexic friend (anorexia is to the 1980's what broken ribs from corsets were to the 1890's. In other words, Pop) who probably doesn't have much of an appetite due to all of the heroin she mainlines. Kind of a closet habit, you know, like, it's no big deal, right?

Mr. Moldable's best friend from high school is a together kind of guy, too. He deals drugs, does drugs and is a homosexual prostitute to support his little compulsion. But, like, he drives a black Porsch with tinted windows so he's an okay kind of guy, don't worry about it.

S.P.'s little sisters listen to songs like "Teenage Enema Nurses in Bondage" by bands whose names would get this newspaper censored if they were put in print. They also tell Clay that there is no need for him to lock his bedroom door so they won't steal his cocaine because they can get their own whenever they want. They are twelve. Pop existence begins early in California.

Clay's psychiatrist suggests that they write a screenplay together. He has a framed Rolling Stone cover of Elvis Costello hanging on his office wall. When Clay suggests that they discuss Clay's problems, the psychiatrist replies, "Come on, Clay. Don't be so... mundane."

Other possible titles for this novel: *MTV and its Effect on Nihilistic Rich Kids in Southern California*, *I was Born with a Silver Spoon in my Nose* or *Waiting for Auto: How to Win the Battle with your Parents so that they give you that Mercedes that you REALLY Deserve*.

Bret Easton Ellis must be saluted for getting his first novel published at age twenty. And for getting international attention. And for initiating a new literary genre, the trendoid novel, recognized by its rock'n'roll references and conspicuous consumption cliches. Contrary to what the book sleeve says, *Less Than Zero* is not this decade's *Catcher in the Rye* nor will it ever be. It is a transient novel that will be forgotten as quickly as Pop Rocks, Pet Rocks, Silly String and...Silly Putty.

Bam... Pow... Shazam...



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