

Australia “Gentle Raidings”: American Psycho and Censorship in the City of Churches

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The more things change, the more they stay the same in all their decaying tedium. And so, the censors in Australia have been busying themselves through the not so intelligent arm of the law by insisting that copies of Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho, the Wall Street, psycho dramatic examination of 1980s "Gecko" culture that can only be damned for its disservices to art rather than censorship, be placed under plastic wraps.

Ellis himself described in the *Guardian* what he was hoping to do in the novel. It was an account about his estrangement, his loneliness, rather than an indictment of “yuppie” culture. “In retrospect, Wall Street is just wall paper in the novel.”[1] The critics did not think so, finding in it a digest for torture, murder and dismemberment, with investment banker Patrick Bateman the foolishly murderous messenger. Moralists and critics came together, conflating taste and talent.

Roger Rosenblatt poured scorn on a book he regarded as filled with “moronic and sadistic contents”. He suggested in his *New York Times* review that *American Psycho* “is the journal Dorian Gray would have written had he been a high school sophomore.”[2] The sin there, argued Rosenblatt, was more in what the publishers did, or did not do, regarding the book’s release. Leaf through it at the bookstores, yes, but in heaven’s name, don’t purchase it.

Feminists also took up arms against the book, despite Ellis repeatedly explaining that the book could hardly qualify as an anti-female screed. “Mr. Ellis,” laboured the then president of the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Organization for Women, Tammy Bruce, “is a confused, sick young man with a deep hatred of women who will do anything for a fast buck.”[3] That has not stopped efforts on the part of directors and thespians to flesh out that other side of Bateman – witness Mary Harron’s adaptation, which was also, in due course, assailed for its purported “misogyny”.

On Friday, an Adelaide bookshop owner found himself “gently raided” for selling copies of the novel that were not wrapped in desensitising, prophylactic plastic. Since 1991, Australia’s R18 classification has made the novel, not so much a matter of pulp fiction as plastic wrapped fiction. The entire event was redolent with embarrassment. Yes, the law suggests that it ought to be enforced by the plodders, but there was a feeling that this should have been left to the prurient seeking ecclesiastics.

The absurdity is demonstrated further by the efforts of Imprints Booksellers co-owner Jason Lake to explain what the fuss was all about. “We just assumed the classification has been lifted.” A dangerous assumption indeed – especially where authoritarian habit remains lazily present. “It’s the only book on our shelf that we ever have with a plastic wrapper.”[4] The short of it was that the book be released from the wrapping, because that, of course, is what

counts.

As with any such regulations, the complainant is usually a dowdy wowser who gives an anonymous tip off in the name of protecting the good public's delicate and decently boring taste. The world, with its famines, wars and depredations, is ghastly, but best not talk about it much. Australia, some confection of paradise, is worth defending against knowledge. Fittingly then, such censorship constitutes the giving of two fingers to the public's capacity to come to its own conclusions about taste and how far they wish it to be corrupted. At the very least, they should be 18 or over.

According to the ABC, a "police spokesperson confirmed they received a complaint regarding the novel." (In this case, it proved to be an "aggressive lady", which would have gotten Ellis rather excited.) But the limiting vice of censorship enhances the product, granting it lurid status. Lake himself "suspected a ploy by publishers to keep it in plastic longer because it makes it stand out on the shelf."

Such events give one indigestible food for thought. This is, after all, a country with a legislature that is fast expanding powers to punish individuals for the rather novel idea of thought crime. Assumptions are repeatedly made about who gets radicalised by using social media platforms, and who stays at home to vegetate to the tunes of Team Australia, a ghastly compilation if ever there was one. Patriotism continues to be the crutch of scoundrels.

Eventually, the matter of *American Psycho*, wrapped or not, was resolved after a chat by the police with bookstore staff. According to the police spokesperson, this act of gentle raiding involved police speaking "with bookstore staff, who were very cooperative, and the matter was resolved to the satisfaction of the police." Good to see that not all aspects of the law, including law enforcement, need be mirrors of its ass like qualities.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jul/10/book-club-american-psycho-ellis>

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/16/books/snuff-this-book-will-bret-easton-ellis-get-away-with-murder.html>

[3] <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/20751/1/how-american-psycho-became-a-feminist-statement>

[4] <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-17/american-psycho-removed-from-adelaide-bookshelves/6628846>

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