

Hardcover: US

Finally, 'Less Than Zero' gets its sequel

Bret Easton Ellis' follow-up doesn't match the brilliance of his debut novel

BY BRUCE MACHART
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, HOUSTON

In 1985, Bret Easton Ellis published his bestselling debut novel, *Less Than Zero*, which was quickly adapted into a "Brat Pack" movie. At the time, Ellis was still an undergraduate, and his book was lauded for its terse depictions of the Hollywood elite, of the perennially anesthetized kids and their morally ambivalent parents.

Twenty-five years later, Ellis now offers a short sequel, *Imperial Bedrooms*, and the premise brilliantly assimilates his first novel's Hollywood buzz: "They had made a movie about us," the novel begins. "The movie was based on a book written by someone we knew."

For Ellis fans, this must come as quite a shock. After all, for a quarter of a century they have assumed that the events in *Less Than Zero* were described by its protagonist narrator, Clay, the cocaine-boostered undergraduate who comes home for Christmas break to find a host of demons run amok in the City of Angels. As it turns out, Clay, now presumably the narrator of *Imperial Bedrooms*, had been misrepresented in the first novel by "someone we knew." This someone remains unnamed, though cross-referencing the two texts makes the identity clear.

Otherwise, nothing has really changed. Clay, now a successful screenwriter who returns to LA to help cast his latest film, is still myopic and monomaniacal. He routinely uses his power in the industry to coerce aspiring actors into his bed, and the psychosexual relationships that ensue are as unfulfilling as ever. When Clay grows obsessed with an untalented but beautiful actress named Rain Turner, he manipulates her with promises of a part in his movie.

The old gang is still around, too, and filthy rich despite their apparent lethargy. There's Blair, Clay's high school girlfriend, and Julian, his oft-abused chum. Rip, Clay's former drug dealer, is now disfigured by his predilection for plastic surgery. And then there is Trent, now a successful Hollywood insider and Blair's husband of convenience.

The only novelty of *Imperial Bedrooms* is in the noirlike mystery Ellis constructs. From the moment Clay arrives in the city, he is being followed. Dark-windowed cars lurk on the street below his high-rise condo, their drivers sending threatening text messages from blocked numbers.

Yet Ellis seems far more interested in befuddling his readers than in creating fully developed characters. It is no coincidence that the old chess metaphor (and the LA band X's song lyrics) "this is the game that moves as you play" appears so often in his work.

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IMPERIAL BEDROOMS

BY BRET EASTON ELLIS

192 PAGES

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While most metafiction aims to call attention to the artifice of art, Ellis seeks to confuse reality with artifice. And who can blame him? In a novel where the narrative rules are fluid (and therefore not rules at all), where the game changes as it's played, the author is unfettered by such inconveniences as character motivation, causal relationships between events and plausibility.

In the end, Clay is either delusional or very, very unlucky. Only a handful of days in Los Angeles, and he finds himself (and this no-talent actress to whom he's so drawn) at the heart of a pulsing miasma of evil involving drugs, prostitution, murderous Mexicans, torture and comparatively pedestrian sins such as infidelity. It's really quite a mess.

Perhaps more troubling is the fact that, for all his struggles, Clay remains unknown to the reader. We are told during a session with his psychologist that "the pattern that keeps repeating itself is again pointed out, and its reasons are located, and we practice techniques to lessen the pain." Again we are given only abstractions, as neither "the pattern" nor "its reasons" nor the "techniques to lessen the pain" are revealed.

But Ellis is savvy and clearly aware of what he puts on the page. In *Less Than Zero*, after returning from New England, Clay is forever described by his suntanned friends as being pale. At the end of *Imperial Bedrooms*, the last thing Blair says to Clay is, "You don't look like anything has happened to you. And you're so pale." No doubt Ellis intends this pallor as a metaphor for Clay's interior life, but it also serves as a description of yet another inferior sequel, which is drained of its vitality and not only less than *Less Than Zero*, but less than fully alive on the page.

astonishing translation tool; the system operates in at least 70 languages. While Kirkpatrick calls the translation tool "among the company's greatest product innovations," he never explains what makes it so. The absence of any such technical explanations is a shame, especially because, in the early going at Facebook, Zuckerberg apparently wrote spectacular code. The parallels between him and Microsoft's Bill Gates — another Harvard dropout who wrote code — are obvious and yet unexplored.

There is plenty of business drama in *The Facebook Effect*, because although Zuckerberg may be famous for igniting firestorms over the privacy of Facebook users, he seems ambivalent about capitalism and surprisingly sophisticated about business. "We'll figure that out later" is Zuckerberg's standard answer to hyperventilating financiers who insist that Facebook sits atop

untapped riches. Rather than chasing revenues, Zuckerberg chases users; his desire to expand his social network seems insatiable — and is as close as anything to the real secret of his success.

Throughout this fast-paced book, Zuckerberg holds center stage, the one constant amid a bewildering array of supporting but ultimately disposable characters. The story of how Zuckerberg hatched Facebook from his Harvard dorm room — and managed to overcome largely spurious complaints over code theft by jealous Harvard undergrads — makes for gripping reading.

But once Zuckerberg drops out and relocates to Palo Alto, Kirkpatrick struggles to maintain his tale. Zuckerberg, it turns out, is no business whiz; he doesn't talk much to his colleagues and he cycles through senior managers about as quickly as Raiders owner Al Davis sours on

BY TAYLOR BRIERE

LCD Soundsystem

This Is Happening
DFA Records

This *This Is Happening* is the third studio album released by James Murphy under the name LCD Soundsystem. It is the follow-up to the critically acclaimed *Sound of Silver*, an album that put Murphy at the center of everything hip in the indie music world back in 2007.

Three years later, Murphy sounds like a man who's enjoying the spotlight and having as much fun as he can on *This Is Happening*, which he says will be LCD Soundsystem's final album. "I believe in waking up together/so that means making eyes across the room," he sings on *Drunk Girls*, the album's ultra-catchy first single. Propelled along by crunchy guitar and booming synthesizers, the song is likely to become a dance rock anthem.

There is no doubting the caliber of the music here, which sounds like your favorite songs from the 1980s being given a once-over with modern production gloss and tongue-in-cheek wit. *You Wanted a Hit's* chunky palm-muted guitar riffs and vocal phrasing sound like something straight from The Cars' music book, and the playfully spooky synths of *I Can Change* instantly bring the hit *She Blinded Me With Science* to mind.

But LCD Soundsystem is at its artistic best on songs that build to powerful climaxes, as on the closing to *All I Want*, where Murphy's repeatedly sings "take me home" atop an insistent, distorted guitar riff, while melodic synths explode into atonal splinters.

This Is Happening is one of the most fun records of the year, and a fitting finale for the LCD Soundsystem project.

Broken Social Scene

Forgiveness Rock Record
Arts and Crafts

As one of indie rock's most celebrated acts, Broken Social Scene functions more as a loose collective of musicians than a traditional band, with an ever-changing roster that at one point swelled to more than 19 members. That number has since been cut to seven, though innumerable guest musicians, many of them ex-members themselves, were invited to play on the group's fourth studio album, *Forgiveness Rock Record*.

Forgiveness Rock Record is perhaps the most straightforward Broken Social Scene album to date. Though the band's songs are still splattered with instrumental jams and artful noise, some of the youthful experimentalism that characterized earlier releases seems to have been abandoned. But that isn't to say the band has regressed. In fact, the album is a step forward into more measured, mature songwriting.

The album's most successful moments tend to be its quietest. The single *Sweetest Kill*, with its mellifluous synths and heavy reverb, is an aching beautiful ode to life's uncertainties. Kevin Drew's voice has never sounded better as he sings, "All the time we get by/Trying to figure out our lives/Like a fade out."

On *Highway Slipper Jam*, feather-soft vocals float atop a nimble acoustic guitar and polished percussion as the band ambles through four and a half minutes of airy pop.

But the band has never limited itself to slow, subtle jams. *Sentimental X's* bouncy, cyclical bass builds to a sterling climax in familiar Broken Social Scene style, with triumphant horns and squealing synthesizers, before fading out in a wash of white noise.

The band's 2002 breakout record *You Forgot It in People* will be remembered as a landmark album in indie rock, a feat difficult to duplicate. That said, *Forgiveness Rock Record* includes some of the best music the band has ever released.

Bonnie "Prince" Billy and the Cairo Gang

The Wonder Show of the World
Domino

The *Wonder Show of the World* is singer-songwriter Will Oldham's 14th album under the Bonnie "Prince" Billy name, and is a continuation of his collaboration with The Cairo Gang, which consists of guitarist Emmett Kelly and bassist Shahzad Ismaily.

Though *The Wonder Show of the World* is far less ornate than some of Oldham's recent releases, the musicianship on it is solid, with The Cairo Gang making some tasteful contributions. Nowhere is that more evident than on the album's opener and standout track *Troublesome Houses*, on which a wandering bass line adds some melodic intrigue to the simple chord progression atop which Oldham sings, "I once loved a girl/but she couldn't take that I visited troublesome houses."

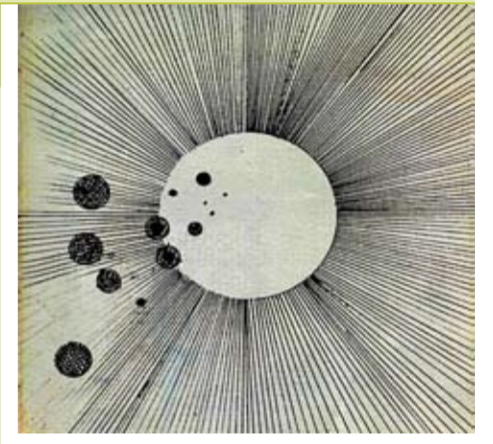
While his voice has improved considerably over the years, Oldham is not a great singer in the traditional sense. His gift is in many ways a rarer one, however, as the grit of his vocals breathes a special life into his songs, carrying his words far further than would otherwise be possible.

On *Cornstalks or Among Them*, a simple, sparse track haunted by desperation and sadness, he pleads to a lost lover for a second chance: "I have saved enough that I can go/But where to find you/I don't know."

And on the album closer, *Kids*, Oldham seems to hint that he is on the verge of a complete breakdown, "I have gone from place to place/Weeks or only steps ahead only/Of something following/Now I am becoming afraid to move."

Although *The Wonder Show of the World* is not one of Oldham's greatest albums (look to the critically acclaimed *I See a Darkness* to understand what he's capable of as a songwriter), it is nevertheless quite good and likely to please anyone who's a fan of singer-songwriters with an Americana feel.

Flying Lotus

Cosmogramma
Warp Records

Flying Lotus is the moniker of electronic musician Steven Ellison, who is perhaps best known for his work on Cartoon Network's *Adult Swim*, for which he provides snippets of music. It might not be the claim to fame most musicians dream of, but it has helped to put Ellison on the map. *Cosmogramma*, his second album for Warp Records and third overall, sees him continuing his evolution as a uniquely talented electronic music producer worthy of far more attention.

Most of the songs on *Cosmogramma* are short for electronic music, often not reaching the two-minute mark. But sounds and motifs are repeated continuously on the album, providing listeners with a compass to work their way through what would otherwise be very schizophrenic terrain, such as the speed at which Ellison juggles ideas.

Ellison is the nephew of jazz greats Alice and John Coltrane, and *Cosmogramma* is drenched in a deep jazz influence. The album's mix of jazz and electronica at some points calls to mind the sounds of other artists, particularly on the drum 'n' bass track *Pickled*, which makes use of a Squarepusher-esque bass sound with cut-up beats to great effect.

The tracks *Arkestry* and *Recoiled* mix some jazzy acoustic drums and brass with an angelic harp to create a chilled-out ambiance akin to LTJ Bukem's work.

Adding some star power to the mix, Radiohead front man Thom Yorke makes a guest appearance on the track *... And the World Laughs With You*, a song that almost sounds like it could be an *Amnesiac* B-side.

But despite all these references, it would be wrong to write-off Ellison's music as derivative, because when taken all together, his sound is one-of-a-kind. He's put together a quality record that displays a special talent for arranging disparate sounds and styles into a cohesive unit. Anyone who favors a more challenging breed of electronic music should consider giving it a spin.

Hardcover: US

Author holds Facebook founder under the microscope

David Kirkpatrick endeavors to uncover what makes Mark Zuckerberg tick in this timely tour of the social networking Web site

BY G. PASCAL ZACHARY

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO

David Kirkpatrick sets a difficult task for himself in writing a definitive account of one of the great technology stories of all time. Facebook — hatched by Harvard students and enormously popular since moving beyond elite colleges a mere six years ago — is one of the most controversial companies in the world.

In *The Facebook Effect*, the company's chief executive and guiding intelligence, a 26-year-old East Coast transplant named Mark Zuckerberg, comes across as a reclusive know-it-all, an irascible rebel prone to sophomoric pranks. Kirkpatrick profusely thanks Zuckerberg for his cooperation, but his is not an authorized account. In these pages, Zuckerberg so often shops Facebook for sale to big-name media tycoons, only to reject deals at the last moment, that his manner seems insulting, even

humiliating. Yet Kirkpatrick finds these failed deals irresistible copy, so much so that his book might be better titled, "How many times can one man offer to sell his company for billions of dollars and then renege?"

Kirkpatrick, a superb technology journalist who worked for *Fortune* magazine for two decades, is most interested in financial issues — and especially how rich Zuckerberg will become if ever he does pull the trigger and sell the company for cash.

Kirkpatrick rarely provides any explanations of how Facebook has achieved its vaunted "effect" technologically; software complexity is sacrificed for business simplicity, but Kirkpatrick doesn't demystify the mechanics of how Facebook created "a fundamentally new form of communication."

Typical is Kirkpatrick's treatment of Facebook's

PUBLICATION NOTES



THE FACEBOOK EFFECT: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE COMPANY THAT IS CONNECTING THE WORLD

BY DAVID KIRKPATRICK

372 PAGES

SIMON & SCHUSTER

experiencing Facebook is more like watching a movie than doing a Google search. Facebook seems like entertainment, a way of passing the time. Google improves productivity, helps a person get stuff done faster. Though new features on Facebook are starting to offer more productivity options, the core attraction remains social.

To be sure, the Facebook story is unfinished. The company seems balanced between finding business wealth from its service and imploding, abandoned by frustrated fans who shift their allegiances to other idle pursuits — or are concerned about protecting their user information.

Zuckerberg, no longer a neophyte, is clearly shrewd, brilliant and wildly ambitious. Don't bet against him finding a way to achieve both a stable business and a distinctive social good — an achievement that will surely spawn more books about him.