



Bad News

Edward St. Aubyn

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Now a 5-Part Limited Event Series on Showtime, Starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Blythe Danner

In *Bad News*, the second installment in Edward St. Aubyn's wonderful, wry and profound series, the Patrick Melrose Cycle, Patrick, now in his twenties, is traveling to New York to collect the ashes of his recently deceased father. Deep in the grasp of a crippling drug addiction, he spends most of his time searching for a fix, alternately suffering from withdrawals, hallucinations, and anguish over his tyrannical father's death. Written in unflinching, breathtakingly resonant prose, St. Aubyn paints another haunting landscape of human suffering.

Bad News Details

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Roman Clodia says

The tragedy of old age when a man is too weak to hit his own child. No wonder he had died.

More bitter, more scabrous than *Never Mind*, this second of the Melrose novels is set 17 years later: it's now 1982 and Patrick is both independently-wealthy and a confirmed junkie. A trip to New York to collect his father's ashes is the context for a drug-fuelled orgy of self-loathing, and risky, quasi-suicidal behaviour.

What lifts the book from the gutter where Patrick, just about metaphorically, revels is the marvellously raw and visceral depiction of the highs and lows of shooting up, and the intelligent awareness of his consciousness. Organised with references to *King Lear* (' 'Let me not go mad,' shouted Patrick in a voice that started like his own, but became more like John Gielgud's with the last two words') and the *Odyssey*, with the references to Ithaca, homecoming and a funny/nausea-inducing 'pig' episode. Given the title of the next volume, *Some Hope*, I'm assuming this is the nadir, Patrick Melrose's descent into the underworld.

Short enough to rocket through, this is dark and blackly - what? comic is too simple a word and doesn't do justice to the layers of self-knowledge and self-contempt that, nevertheless, cannot quite dampen the shaky yet knowing, sardonic, deeply ironic voice of Patrick Melrose.

christa says

Well, nuts. I practically lit "Bad News," the second book of Edward St Aubyn's Patrick Melrose series off of the first super innovative, funny, dark, mind-blowing first novel of the series and meh. It turned out be a dud follow up to a book that made me shoot exclamation points from my pores.

In the first book, Patrick Melrose is a 5-year-old daredevil with the first asshole buds forming in his personality. "Never Mind" is a day in the life of his parents, their friends and the kid and the story is told in a way that takes a leisurely stroll from perspective to perspective, in the way you might overhear conversations as you walk through a mall. It is all headed toward a very uncomfortable and terrible dinner party. But before that, Patrick will be the victim in an especially ugly violation and maybe not even fully understand what has happened to him.

The second book opens about 20 years later. Patrick Melrose's wretched father has died and he is on his way to New York City to pick up the ashes. Luckily, he's flying Concorde because, like a heightened case of his mother in Book One, it takes a careful calibration of drugs to level him out and booze can only sustain him for so long.

Once again, the story covers a short span of time. This time the story is mostly internalized as Patrick meets with old family friends, tries to score bunches of drugs, picks up the remains of David Melrose, outwardly expresses that he despised his father but seems to be inwardly circling a more complicated set of emotions, gets suicidal, hallucinates, takes a dangerous amount of drugs, passes out in a bathroom and attempts to cheat

on the adoring girlfriend he barely tolerates.

The unfortunate thing about reading in 2013 is that there are no end to the addiction memoirs and 80s drug fiction and having this sort of background knowledge lessens the impact this story might have had in the mid-1990s when it was published. Though, as that is still a post-McInerney, post-Ellis era, it must have felt at least kind of tired at the time. Also, St. Aubyn's skill as a writer with a great eye for details works against him and his drug scenes get bogged down with missed veins, blackened points of needle entry, muddled shoot ups and dropped syringes and if you've never considered the dance between Cocaine and Heroin, it's a little tough to follow.

Toward the end of the story, St. Aubyn taps into another strength: His stereo of character voices. Except it doesn't really work here. It's too little, too late and comes off as clunky rather than as clever as it was in the first novel. I suppose it would get exhausting to write the same way for each installment of a five-book series, but I kept thinking to myself: "Why can't you be more like your first book?"

Whatever. I'm in now. Moving on to "Some Hope."

Cheryl says

That was one hell of a celebration, Patrick.

This spree of alcohol and drug-fueled self-loathing drags the reader along in a juddering skid through his familiar gutters.

The density of the metaphors is outdone only by the recklessness of the drug use. Both were magnificent.

Jason Koivu says

Oof! This is an epically depressing game of chutes and ladders. The degradation is so very sad-making, and yet, there is a beauty here, at least in the writing. Patrick Melrose's suppression of the demon's of his past with a drug binge described in vivid detail is a marvel to behold. I wish I hadn't. It's made me absolutely miserable...which is how I know the author is on his game! On to book three, which I'm led to believe holds some hope in it...at least in the title.

Leseparatist says

As delightfully witty and terrible and mean and funny as the previous volume. The barrage of awfulness that is the inside of the protagonist's mind could become a little tiring, but it was always so on purpose. We follow a person who is deeply broken, sexist and racist and fatmisic (phobic really doesn't begin to describe him), and it's impossible not to feel some empathy while the book mocks him ruthlessly. There's a scene near the end where Patrick, quite high at the time, uses a variety of psychic techniques in an effort to seduce a girl without speaking to her that made me laugh out loud at its conclusion.

And at the same time, what a moving, evocative portrayal of coping (or not coping) with trauma, of addiction

and obsession and the very real suffering underneath. There's a line Patrick says in response to someone trying to excuse his father's behaviour: "Cruelty is the opposite of love ... not just some inarticulate version of it" that resonated with me. But now I guess I'll take a month or two off before I embark on *Some Hope*.

Anna says

From the first Patrick Melrose novel, *Never Mind*, it was overwhelmingly evident that poor abused Patrick was not going to have a happy life. 'Bad News' confirms this with a vengeance. It takes the reader to 1982 and follows Patrick to New York, where he picks up his father's ashes and goes on a drug binge that he is lucky to survive. Between doses of coke, smack, etc, Patrick attempts small talk with miscellaneous family friends and acquaintances. These interactions are the best part of the book, as St Aubyn has an incredible talent for evoking social nuance. Whilst mouthing platitudes about his father, the acquaintances studiously ignore the evidence that Patrick is a physical wreck, drug addict, and abuse victim. An exemplary incidence of this occurs in this exchange between Patrick and a certain Mr. Banks:

"I don't think that people noo so much about how to bring up kids in those days. A lot of parents in your fawther's generation just didn't know how to express their love."

"Cruelty is the opposite of love," said Patrick, "not just some inarticulate version of it."

'Bad News' is as viciously well-written as *Never Mind* and Patrick's spiral of self-destruction is painful to read. I was reminded somewhat of *The Goldfinch*, although Patrick's substance abuse seems more extreme and hopeless. Theo Decker at least had friends to reach out to, whereas Patrick appears unmoored and alienated from everyone who isn't actively selling him drugs. If I hadn't known that there were several more novels in Patrick Melrose series, I would have expected him to be dead of an overdose before the end of this book.

Brett says

You know what's more boring to someone than telling them about your dreams? Telling a recovered addict about the details of one of your binges. OK I get it - St Aubyn either was one or knows one - it was pretty decent detail though you can never really write down all the shit going on in someone's head who's shooting for the line just short of OD but It's as good as I've seen...but still, where was the clever Britcasm of the first novel...at least it was short. On to the next one. And again, retrieving your fathers ashes from New York, scoring and shooting drugs and getting on a plane home does not a novel make.

Leslie says

So ok. Tiny recap in case you missed my review of the first one. I bought this series before the Showtime miniseries with Benedict Cumberbatch was in the works. I did not read book one until I saw they were making a show. I didn't love it but I liked it and the author can write a sentence that's painfully gorgeous. I

started book two with the intention of reading all five before trying the show. I was mildly invested. Still, overall loving his writing. Noticing more in this book how he can really ramble and seems awfully pleased with himself in places. I can't explain it. (Maybe the increase in rambling is due to the whole book being in the mindset of someone on drugs?) Then, last weekend, Showtime had a free trial and I caved to my love of Benedict and binged all five episodes. Oops. I rarely watch things before reading the books. Number one-it ruins the images I've created in my head. Number two-even if the book is amazing, I tend to get bored. So I finished this one but I don't know if I'll continue to the third. They are possibly ruined for me. Time will tell.

Paul Bryant says

Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge? who eat up my people as they eat bread.

Every one of them is gone back: they are altogether become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Psalm 53.

I cannot be the only reader of Bad News who by page 20 had already cast the gold-medallist of supercilious contempt Richard E Grant of Withnail and I

as Patrick Melrose, the ghastly rich 22 year old English junkie. As soon as young Melrose stares into the room, his eyes like slits, his pallor of the grave, his disdain strong enough to support a family of five, and says "*I don't fucking believe it*" Richard E Grant's freezing upper-class tones are in your head to the last page. Which is a good thing.

Sample Withnail dialogue:

Withnail: [on the way to the car] At some point or another I want to stop and get hold of a child.

Marwood: What do you want a child for?

Withnail: To tutor it in the ways of righteousness, and procure some uncontaminated urine.

Later

Withnail: [seeing a road sign reading "ACCIDENT BLACK SPOT. DRIVE WITH EXTREME CARE"] Look at that, accident black spot! These aren't accidents! They're throwing themselves into the road gladly! Throwing themselves into the road to escape all this hideousness!

Sample Melrose observation:

Patrick looked down the avenue. It was like the opening shot of a documentary on overpopulation. He walked down the street, imagining the severed heads of passers-by rolling in the gutter in his wake.

Later at a restaurant :

"Would you care for a dessert, sir?"

A rather bizarre question. How was he supposed to "care for" a dessert? Did he have to visit it on Sundays? Send it a Christmas card?

This is a black hole junkie memoir presented as a novel, three days in the life, where Patrick's dad has died in New York and he has to go and collect the body and get it cremated. Patrick has had a difficult relationship with his father. He's lugging a box full of his father's ashes around New York and a thought suddenly strikes him:

Patrick realised that it was the first time he had been alone with his father for more than ten minutes without being buggered, hit or insulted.

These early experiences have soured his demeanor:

He hated happy families with their mutual encouragement, and their demonstrative affection, and the impression they gave of valuing each other more than other people. It was utterly disgusting.

Patrick is always alone, especially when he's with people. There is no other in this novel. Only I. It's the Story of I, the Story of an I, a junkie I, the delirious whirl of fixes and highs and rushes and comedowns, and hold on, aren't we bored of all that? But great writing is never the what, only the how. Not what you are talking about, but how. As I read this deliciously disgusting stuff a song sang itself in my ear : I want to tell you. My head is filled with things to say. But when you're near, all those things they seem to. Slip away. Actually that's the precise opposite of Patrick. He doesn't want to tell anyone. He wishes, like a previous champion hater, that the human race had only one neck and he had his hands round it. Except he'd never do that, he'd be nodding out in a bath and nearly drowning. There would be someone unconscious in the bedroom but he wouldn't remember who it was or that they were there.

Patrick is so rich he has three Faberge eggs with his crispy bacon, he flies to New York on Concorde, he shacks up at a five star hotel and he goes scoring in Alphabet City just for some fun colour contrast. Cue missed main vein, horrific black arm bulging, fever in the scum brown bowl, sort of thing. Patrick the dreadful junkie considers himself superior to some others he knows:

At least he wasn't fixing in his groin. Gouging around unsuccessfully among those elusive veins could make one question the whole intravenous method of absorbing drugs.

Yes, I imagine it would.

There are way too many memoirs of chemical misbehaviour already in print, tiresome tales of debauch, debouch and degradation and who needs another?

– my own picks to click would be

Wonderland Avenue by Danny Sugerman (the shower scene which has more blood than the one in Hitchcock's Psycho is indelible, my dears, indelible)

Junky by Billy Burroughs

Trainspotting by Irvine Welsh – stop what you're doing and read that one next! You already did? Okay!

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Hunter S Thompson

All comedies, all very funny, you have to laugh. And all sort of true.

So, I can't sell you Bad News as anything other than another fierce example of why many thoughtful people have concluded that the only decent thing left for the human race to do is to get off Planet Earth now, just leave, don't look back, give the place back to the voles and the meerkats and the manatees and the pottos and the aardvarks and the Tasmanian devils and the golden tamarins

and the trapdoor spiders and all those creatures not cursed with the self-consciousness which is the glory and the horror of humans and which makes a Dachau for every cathedral and a Tuol Sleng for every symphony, the it seems to me inseparable glory and horror, to think you can have one without the other is utopian.

I knock a star off for a long passage which is a *blatant* steal from the Circe chapter of Ulysses and for some really crass caricatures of rich Americans, come on St Aubyn, you don't need to do that, but otherwise, if you like the blackest of comedy, yes.

Onward to the third Melrose novel.

Phrynnne says

This is book two in a series and it is not as appealing as book one although it is just as well written and occasionally quite funny. The main character, Patrick Melrose has grown up to be a serious drug addict and much of the book is about his addiction in great detail. I know a lot more about drug taking now than I have ever needed or wanted to know. However it is obviously just a stage in Patrick's life and I expect we will see him as a recovered addict in the next book. I plan on starting it right away - I need to know what happens next!

Jessica Woodbury says

Good God there's a lot of drugs in this book.

I get that the brief adventures of a serious drug addict trying to cope with unspeakable emotion is basically a genre in and of itself, but it's never really been my cup of tea. Since I started this book right after NEVER MIND, I began with a lot of sympathy towards Patrick, who's clearly been traumatized for years by his parents and has never learned any kind of coping mechanisms that don't involve substance abuse. But by the end of this book it was getting hard to feel any kind of sympathy for him.

Patrick's detachment is almost complete, his addiction is unspeakably deep. There is virtually nothing else in the book besides his addiction. It was tolerable because St. Aubyn remains a fantastic writer, making this

more visceral than most drug novels, and because I assume this is just one piece of the larger story of Patrick's life in the books to come. At least, I hope so.

Helle says

(3.5 stars) Edward St Aubyn is a really clever man. He has managed to write a novel whose protagonist is a selfish, tragic, upper-class drug addict and whose content I disliked throughout nearly the entire book. Yet, I am helplessly drawn to this series about Patrick Melrose because St Aubyn just writes so damn well:

The four Valiums he had stolen from Kay had helped him face breakfast, but now he could feel the onset of withdrawal, like a litter of drowning kittens in the sack of his stomach.

Bad News is the second book in the series about Patrick Melrose, who is now a grown man. His life hasn't exactly picked up since we left him in *Never Mind*. He receives some 'bad news' at the beginning of this novel – his father is dead – and he travels to New York to collect his father's remains. Thus begins his descent into his own private hell, in which his constant focus is where to get his next fix from, how best to combine cocaine and smack, when to pop in a Quaalude to soften the blow, and how to get through normal events like lunch with a friend without collapsing or offending people when he side-steps their unwelcome commiserations.

The extreme, not to say versatile, drug addiction reminded me of *The Goldfinch* (though that is newer), and Patrick even has a foreign junkie friend who speaks with an accent (like Boris in *The Goldfinch*). Thematically, the novel also reminded me of some of Alan Hollinghurst's novels, the way the protagonists float through their lives, addicted to drugs or sex, without a firm hold on the world.

Once again, the caustic wit that St Aubyn delivers so assuredly, though in smaller doses than in # 1 (the drugs claim rather a lot of space here), is worthy of Waugh or Wilde, as are his constant tone of amused contempt and self-loathing irony (Patrick Melrose, though fictitious, is by all accounts St Aubyn's alter ego). Patrick is a suicidal junkie who is not only scornful of most people who inadvertently cross his path but also so addicted to drugs that he thinks he may be in love with them. He has made a miserable island of his life:

He continually longed for an uncontaminated solitude, and when he got it he longed for it to stop.

But then all solutions were temporary, even death, and nothing gave him more faith in the existence of an afterlife than the inexorable sarcasm of Fate. (...) Who could guess what exquisite torments lay ahead in the holiday camps of eternity?

A whole chapter in the middle is devoted to Patrick's insane hallucinations after a particularly successful fix. A cacophony of voices have an outrageous and surreal discussion in which nothing makes sense, yet it is somehow absurdly funny. A small sample:

Television (snivelling and shivering): 'Turn me on, man. Gimme me a turn-on.'

Mr. President: 'Ask not what your television can do for you, but what you can do for your television.'

Ecstatic populace: 'Hooray! Hooray!'

Mr. President: 'We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship...'

Von Trapp Family Singers (ecstatically): 'Climb every mountain!'

Despite the awe-inspiring prose and the clear evidence of St Aubyn's intellect and wit (which I simply adore), I felt weighed down by the sheer extent of Patrick's drug abuse and his morbid take on life. It is hardly surprising given his upbringing (viz. *Never Mind*), and it felt utterly real, but I did not love this novel as I did the first one. (I hope things look up for him in the books to come. I'm hopeful that they do as the next one is called *Some Hope*).

With every situation – and he was always getting himself into situations – he saw the choices stretching out crazily, like the broken blood vessels of tired eyes. And with every action he heard the death cries of all the things he had not done.

Ashley says

"Everything was under control.

No, he mustn't think about it, or indeed about anything, and especially not about heroin, because heroin was the only thing that stopped him scampering around in a hamster's wheel of unanswerable questions. Heroin was the cavalry. Heroin was the missing chair leg, made with such precision that matched every splinter of the break. Heroin landed purring at the base of his skull, and wrapped itself darkly around his nervous system, like a black cat curling up on its favorite cushion. It was as soft and rich as the throat of a wood pigeon, or the splash of sealing wax onto a page, or a handful of gems slipping from palm to palm.

The way other people felt about love, he felt about heroin, and he felt about love the way other people felt about heroin: that it was a dangerous and incomprehensible waste of time."

This was very nearly a five star book for me. The phrase "tour de force" comes to mind, except that phrase has such positive connotations, and being in the head of Patrick Melrose is in no way a positive experience, excepting the dark pleasure of his (and of course the author's) self-loathing cleverness.

Bad News follows Patrick over the course of three days, when he travels to New York to retrieve his father's ashes. The old man has died unexpectedly, and everyone assumes Patrick should be in mourning, but he knows this is a turning point, a chance for freedom. Patrick's father abused him in every way a person can abuse another, for years, and nobody ever did anything about it. The most striking phrase from the first books was, "Nobody should do that to anybody else." Here, it was Patrick upon learning his father has died, thinking, "I've got to get this right." (Paraphrasing here because my copy is not with me while I'm writing this.)

The death of Patrick's father is the inciting event here, but it's not the center of the book. Rather, it is, but it's an absent center. Patrick's father in life or death is an invisible coat that Patrick wears around with him constantly, and his presence is constantly felt around the edges of everything Patrick does, acknowledged or not.

But the real center is Patrick and his relationship to drugs. Basically all of them. He is one of the worst addicts I've ever heard of, and honestly I don't know how he's not already dead. He spends the entire book high out of his mind off cocaine, alcohol, Quaaludes, or heroin. Sometimes chasing one with another. Sometimes many at once. Patrick Melrose is a man who never wants to be alone with his thoughts, he seeks the oblivion of pleasure, or pain. His abusive childhood fucked him over real good, such that drugs are the most pleasurable thing in his life.

Patrick is not likable at all, and yet I felt for him. He's self-loathing, and that loathing extends to the rest of the population. He is an indiscriminate misanthropist. He was brought up in a world that either refused to see the abuses he suffered, or that was unable to see it entirely, because the things the upper classes value have no actual value, and in fact do actual harm. And nothing in his life has given him the tools, so far, to escape the prison of his mind, or the world as it was presented to him.

It's tragic, and gross, and I couldn't look away. The book is relatively short at only 166 pages, and it flew by. I'm not usually the type of person to like reading about, well, pretty much anything this book is about. But something about it captured me anyway. Patrick is a living reminder of the damage human beings can do to one another. And of course, it probably helps that St. Aubyn is a great writer. He has a gift for imagery, and a sense of pacing and timing that makes it look easy. He'll go off on some flowery over the top tangent, and then finish it up with something totally non-sequitur, effectively pulling his own release valve, and keeping you turning the pages. The autobiographical nature of the book probably has something to do with that. This is a raw book, and it feels like something the author knows intimately.

I did watch the TV adaptation with Benedict Cumberbatch before I read the books, so maybe that is further helping my affection for the terrible Patrick. I found it interesting to read the book after seeing the show, the way the show externalized Patrick's internal struggles, and translated his erudite hallucinations, his clever downward spiral, into a visual medium. It's really a quite faithful adaptation.

One thing about this book is that by the end, you don't see a way out for him. He's in the middle of the shit, and he's not getting out any time soon. Whereas in the show, the episode ends with the implication that Patrick has finally had enough, and wishes to crawl out of the hole he's dug for himself. I can't decide which version I like better.

In the end, not giving this five stars because the second half, Patrick's spiral got to be too much for me and my delicate feelings, and as he declined, his cleverness went with him. The latter half of the book was more frantic, desperate, and he was more unlikable. It's really rather remarkable writing, but it was sad and bleak, which are not my favorite things. So, four stars.

Ammar says

The Melrose Saga continues.

Name: Patrick Melrose

Age: 22

Occupation: Rich Addict

Location: Pierre Hotel, New York

Reason: In New York to collect the body of his father David Melrose who passed away.

This book focus on Patrick most of the time. We see the real addict in him, the way he needs to fill that void in him.. the joy and happiness that some bad news brings to him and let him on a wonderful spiral down the abyss.

Mark Joyce says

Bad News has strong similarities with the weaker novels of Brett Easton Ellis, in that it's a studiedly unpleasant, occasionally very funny but ultimately monotonous and forgetable depiction of a drug addicted misanthrope. For the same reason there are also parallels with Irvine Welsh, except St Aubyn's smackhead is a self-pitying English aristocrat rather than a violent Scottish sociopath. Irvine Welsh and Brett Easton Ellis are both perfectly decent authors that I've enjoyed reading, so that's not intended to be a dismissive comparison. However, the fawning reviews for the Patrick Melrose Novels led me to expect something a lot more substantial and interesting. Two books in and I'm still struggling to see what all the fuss is about.
