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The 50 Greatest Crime Writers, No 1: Patricia Highsmith

[Marcel Berlins](#)

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She broke most of the rules that govern the writing of crime fiction. She followed none of the usual formulae. There are no heroic cops, tough private eyes or amateur sleuths; often there is no mystery and therefore no solution; good does not necessarily triumph over evil.

Graham Greene got it right when he wrote that "she created a world of her own, claustrophobic and irrational, which we enter each time with a sense of personal danger." Her first novel, *Strangers on a Train* (1950), introduced the menacing atmosphere that would permeate almost all her novels. Two men meet on a train. One has good reasons to kill his wife, the other his father; they exchange the carrying out of the murders, so that neither would have a discoverable motive. In the voice of one of her characters, Highsmith posits a philosophical thread that runs through her entire oeuvre. "Any kind of person can murder. Purely circumstances and not a thing to do with temperament. People get so far - and it takes just the least little thing to push them over the brink. Anybody." Also discernible in this novel are the sexual ambiguities that played a part in many of her later works. Do not confuse the novel with the film that Alfred Hitchcock made of it (for which Raymond Chandler wrote an early version of the screenplay). The film lapsed into a happier ending than the book.

The five Tom Ripley books established Highsmith as a true original in crime fiction, and a superb writer. The first, *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955), introduces the charming, good-looking, bisexual, conscience-free con man who goes on to become a killer. He is amoral and a psychopath. Yet, far from being repulsive, he emerges as a sympathetic, even attractive, character.

Highsmith shocks by her apparent disdain for the moral frontiers that other crime writers feel they ought to observe. It's not just that Tom Ripley gets away with murder and a large array of lesser crimes.

Escaping justice is by no means unusual in crime fiction. Where Highsmith's hero differs is that there is no hint that he will receive retribution for his sins; nor is there any question of redemption. But what shocks even more than Ripley's indifference is Highsmith's tacit approval of it. His amorality may disturb readers, but she's at ease with it, even pleased that he has succeeded once again in upsetting the forces of good and normality. That is why, I believe, the American public never gave Highsmith the acclaim and recognition she achieved in Europe. They found her too uncomfortable. She moved to the more receptive Continent in the Sixties, dying in Switzerland in 1995 aged 74.

It doesn't require much depth of analysis to attribute Highsmith's awkward and contrary attitudes to an unhappy and traumatic childhood, followed by a life marked by unsuccessful lesbian relationships and infatuations, alcoholism, loneliness and eccentric habits. Her personal distress was instrumental in turning her into the writer she became, the greatest of all crime writers.

One to read: *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) [Buy the book here](#)

Her strange loves: snails and turpentine

Patricia Highsmith had an intense and tumultuous relationship with her mother, Mary, who had tried to abort her by drinking turpentine. She later said: "It's funny you adore the smell of turpentine, Pat".

In her late twenties, she fell in love with a married woman she glimpsed in the toy section of the New York department store Bloomingdale's. The two never met, but Highsmith based the central character in *The Price of Salt* upon her.

Highsmith used the pen name Claire Morgan for this controversial lesbian love story, which was published in 1954. It was later republished as *Carol*, under Highsmith's real name.

She loved animals, including snails, which she kept as pets. According to Andrew Wilson in his Highsmith biography *Beautiful Shadow*, she once opened her handbag at a cocktail party to reveal a head of lettuce and about 100 of the creatures, and when she moved to France she smuggled them into the country, in batches, under her breasts.

Highsmith left her \$3 million estate to an artists' retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York, where she wrote *Strangers on a Train*.

Farley Granger on Patricia Highsmith

When Hitchcock told me the story of *Strangers on a Train*, I was delighted by it. Movies in those times, particularly the mystery stuff, were fairly simple, but this was much more complicated; the psychological games were all fascinating. There's all this discussion of a homoerotic bond between the guys: that was never discussed in the early 1950s.

It's that kind of character that Patricia Highsmith has written throughout the years, Ripley in particular, that is unique. She gave you a lot of room to fill in a lot of the emotional whys and wherefores and what could have been. She gives you freedom."

Farley Granger played Guy Haines in Alfred Hitchcock's Strangers on a Train (1951)

[The Times review of Patricia Highsmith's collected stories](#)

[The Sunday Times review of Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith by Andrew Wilson](#)

[The Times Books group: The Talented Mr Ripley](#)

[Video: Patricia Highsmith talks about Ripley, sexuality and gender](#)

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