

VOLUME 56, NUMBER 11 • JULY 2, 2009

## This Woman Is Dangerous

By **Michael Dirda**

*The Complete Ripley Novels: The Talented Mr. Ripley, Ripley Under Ground, Ripley's Game, The Boy Who Followed Ripley, Ripley Under Water*

by Patricia Highsmith

Norton, 1,456 pp. (boxed set), \$100.00

"The essential American soul," wrote D.H. Lawrence in a celebrated description, "is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." Of course, he was talking about Natty Bumppo and similar rough-and-tumble frontier spirits. By contrast, the amoral Tom Ripley—novelist Patricia Highsmith's most famous character—is easygoing, devoted to his wife and friends, epicurean, and a killer only by necessity. By my count, necessity leads this polite aesthete to bludgeon or strangle eight people and watch with satisfaction while two others drown. He also sets in motion the successful suicides of three friends he actually, in his way, cares about. Yet aside from an occasional twinge about his first murder, Ripley feels no long-term guilt over these deaths. (Tellingly, he can never quite remember the actual number of his victims.) He was simply protecting himself, his friends and business partners, his home. Any man would, or at least might, do the same.

Tom, as his indulgent creator tends to call him, first appeared in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955). This was Highsmith's fourth published book, preceded by three highly original novels. In *Strangers on a Train* (1950)—later filmed (and softened) by Alfred Hitchcock—two men, hitherto unknown to each other, "exchange" murders, Bruno agreeing to kill Guy's estranged wife in return for Guy doing away with Bruno's hated father. Each will consequently possess a perfect alibi. In *The Price of Salt* (1953, published under the name Claire Morgan) the nineteen-year-old Therese falls in love with the married Carol—and perhaps for the first time a novel about lesbians ends happily. In paperback this story of "a love that society forbids" sold over a million copies. In *The Blunderer* (1954) Highsmith fully established what would become her trademark theme: the blurring of fantasy and reality, usually reinforced by some sort of *folie à deux*, in which two very different people, almost always men, grow symbiotically obsessed with each other, ultimately to the point of madness and mutual destruction. In this case, a successful murderer is undone because a blundering fool hopes to emulate him.

By the time Highsmith (1921–1995) came to write *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, she was just entering her thirties. Born in Texas to an overbearing mother whom she grew to loathe, Highsmith attended Barnard College during World War II, where she studied Latin and modern languages, edited the school newspaper, and read widely in American and European literature. From an early age, she drank hard, fell in and out of love with various women (and one or two men), and rather quickly came to understand her own severe and private nature. Far more than Tom Ripley, she fits that Lawrentian description of being hard, isolate, and stoic, especially in her later years, when she grew increasingly cranky and notorious for her caustic remarks and prejudices. In her youth, though, the

novelist was more outgoing and distinctly attractive, albeit in a slightly butch way. In *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950s* her one-time lover, Marijane Meaker, describes her as "tall and thin. Black, shoulder-length hair, with dark brown eyes. She looked like a combination of Prince Valiant and Rudolf Nureyev."

Highsmith lived all her life by her pen and typewriter (an Olympia manual), starting off by producing copy for comics and later turning out a steady stream of suspense and horror stories, many of which appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. Her novels never became popular in the US. Here she might sell only four thousand copies of, say, *Edith's Diary* (1977)—and ten times that number in France or Germany. Little wonder that she preferred to spend her later years in Europe. The English-speaking world might casually slot her as a writer of crime fiction, but Europeans honored her as a psychological novelist, part of an existentialist tradition represented by her own favorite writers, in particular Dostoevsky, Conrad, Kafka, Gide, and Camus. (That astute critic Brigid Brophy once called her a Dostoevsky "whose gifts include humour and charm.") Highsmith's books, after all, explore human souls in extremis, chronicle men and women sliding toward breakdown, probe the fluid nature of identity, and generally conclude that life is little more than an absurdity and a cheat, when not a downright horror.

Such a bleak outlook makes even Highsmith's best work upsetting and, to some readers, distinctly unpleasant. Yet she's seldom graphic in her brief descriptions of violence and she never depicts the details of sexual encounters. The hallmark of her work is a calm, hallucinatory intensity built on sentences of unemotional plainness and clarity. Her hypersensitive protagonists, logically, inexorably, spiral downhill from ordinary anxiety to murderous rage and madness. Like animals keenly alert for invisible traps or New Yorkers in the first uneasy months after September 11, Highsmith's characters move through their lives with an ever-increasing and sometimes justified wariness. Graham Greene famously called her "a poet of apprehension" who had "created a world of her own—a world claustrophobic and irrational which we enter each time with a sense of personal danger."

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* opens like a classic suspense thriller (with a subdued echo, in fact, of the first sentences of Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*): "Tom glanced behind him and saw the man coming out of the Green Cage, heading his way. Tom walked faster. There was no doubt the man was after him." Tom, who at this time is little more than a jumped-up petty crook, has been defrauding people of Internal Revenue payments, and is naturally worried that the police might be onto his scam. It turns out, however, that the stranger merely wants to talk about his wastrel son Dickie Greenleaf, who is idling his life away in Mongibello, Italy. After Tom plays up an extremely tenuous connection to Dickie, he is offered a free trip to Mongibello, with all expenses paid. His commission, like that of Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*, is to bring home the wayward scion of this wealthy family.

Highsmith actually refers twice to Henry James's novel, which provides the general plot line of the book's first half. But the reader soon starts to pick up on other, darker, literary and psychological associations. In Mongibello, Tom grows enchanted with Dickie's lifestyle and rich-boy nonchalance; before long, he unconsciously begins to mimic his new friend, copying his mannerisms, even trying on his clothes. And he's very good at all this, having first come to New York intending to launch an acting career. Before long, it's hard not to be reminded of doubles and doppelgängers, of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, of Poe's "William Wilson," of back-stabbing theatrical understudies and Jungian shadows. Nothing good, it's clear, can come of this mirroring, this psychological vampirism. At least

nothing good for Dickie, who—shall we say—just happens to die rather suddenly. For Tom, it's another matter.

On the simplest level, the second half of Highsmith's book describes an elaborate con game, in which clever Tom contrives to pass himself off as the dead Dickie Greenleaf. This requires some elaborate masquerading. But Tom has developed a taste for the high life, for fine clothes, expensive objets d'art, first-class travel, and various other amenities, and he'd rather die—or kill—than give them up. Meanwhile, Highsmith ratchets up the tension as Tom twists and turns, struggling desperately to outwit the police, while we are insidiously made to sympathize with him, as if he were Richard Hannay on the run in John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* or the unnamed hero of Geoffrey Household's cat-and-mouse pursuit classic *Rogue Male*.

Yet despite all its suspensefulness, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* when viewed from a slightly different angle approaches the comic: Tom must switch from one persona to another like a vaudeville quick-change artist, even as the plot complications start to recall classic farces about the mixups resulting from mistaken identities. In the later Ripley novels Highsmith will play up this mordant gallows humor. Thus it's oddly pleasing to remember that when she worked at Yaddo (on *Strangers on a Train*), two of the other young artists in residence there would become famous for a similar kind of grotesque comedy—the anarchic crime novelist Chester Himes and the Southern Gothicist Flannery O'Connor.

Between 1955 and 1970, Highsmith produced nine novels, including two of her best: *This Sweet Sickness* (1960), about a man who leads an increasingly vivid fantasy life with his imaginary lover, and *The Tremor of Forgery* (1969), set in Tunis, about the tensions between some expatriates and a deeply alien Arab culture. As in work by Camus and Paul Bowles, the action unfolds against a landscape of heat and mirage and fuzzy moral ambiguity. *The Snail-Watcher and Other Stories*, Highsmith's first and best story collection (of eight), appeared in 1970. That title story is something of a classic among aficionados of gruesome horror, while another, "The Terrapin," is an almost unbearable portrait of a callous mother driving her sensitive young son to murder.

In 1970 Highsmith also brought out *Ripley Under Ground*, and thus established Tom Ripley as a series character. Set five years or so after the death of Dickie Greenleaf, Tom has settled down into the quiet, cultivated life he had always dreamed about. He owns a beautiful house called Belle Ombre some forty kilometers from Paris. He has a treasure of a cook-housekeeper named Madame Annette. More surprisingly, he is happily married to the beautiful twenty-five-year-old Heloise, though their relationship seems more companionate than passionate. Tom quietly spends most of his time gardening and listening to music, improving his French and German, and occasionally visiting neighbors for dinner. In the evenings he sips Margaux while admiring the art on his walls—a Soutine, drawings by Cocteau and Picasso, two Magrittes, and a pair of exceptional paintings by (the fictional) Derwatt, whose intensely expressionist vision resembles Francis Bacon's.

Of course, one of Tom's Derwatts—*Man in Chair*—is a fake.

Despite payouts from a Greenleaf trust and Heloise's allowance from her businessman father, Tom has become a silent partner in a lucrative art forgery operation. He also occasionally assists a shady American named Reeves Minot, who works as a fence and smuggler in Hamburg. Besides the useful income, these associations provide Tom with occasional excitement, allow him to meet new people, and generate the plots of this and the three subsequent Ripley novels.

*Ripley Under Ground* focuses directly on the question of what, if anything, is authentic, whether in personal relations or art. After the rising young painter Derwatt quietly committed suicide, a small group of his friends schemed to pretend that he had merely emigrated to Mexico. (This is, in essence, a variant on Tom's old trick of convincing people that Dickie Greenleaf was still alive.) Gradually, the "reclusive" artist's work was sold off for ever-escalating sums. Then at Tom's suggestion, Derwatt's friend and disciple Bernard Tufts was reluctantly persuaded to start producing a steady stream of "new" paintings. These prove virtually indistinguishable from actual Derwatts.

With understandable annoyance, Tom hears from the Buckmaster Gallery—operated by the little syndicate—that an American collector named Murchison believes his Derwatt to be a forgery. He's starting to make a fuss and risks exposing everyone linked to this lucrative scam. So Tom travels to London, where he disguises himself as the bearded Derwatt and attempts to allay Murchison's suspicions. His acting skills haven't deserted him: "Tom smiled the worn, philosophic smile of a man who had gazed upon Mexican mountains, alone, for years." Still, Murchison senses that something fishy is going on, so Tom—now out of disguise—persuades the collector to come take a look at his two Derwatts at Belle Ombre. Murchison is never seen again.

All this, essentially, provides the frame for our antihero's interactions with the forger Bernard Tufts. Just as Tom once copied Dickie Greenleaf, so Bernard copies Derwatt. Alas, over the years Bernard has grown increasingly moody and despondent, convinced that his forgeries have betrayed both his idol Derwatt and his own talent. Yet Tom reminds him that his imitations are so good—and they give their owners genuine aesthetic satisfaction. Why should anyone have qualms? Besides,

if one painted more forgeries than one's own paintings, wouldn't the forgeries become more natural, more real, more genuine to oneself, even, than one's own painting? Wouldn't the effort finally go out of it and the work become second nature?

Clearly, this is Tom's own case: he may have started out by imitating Dickie, but he has ended up the cultivated and artistic self he longed to be.

While Tom revels in masks and disguises, the deeply troubled Bernard yearns to escape from his divided and suffering self. He despises all this sham. By contrast, Tom actually prefers his phoney Derwatt to his real one. And isn't pleasure the only real criterion that matters?

Fakery, though, suffuses every page of *Ripley Under Ground*. Tom pretends to be Derwatt. Murchison appears to catch a plane at Orly. An effigy of Bernard is found hanging by its neck. A supposedly dead man rises from his grave. Bernard is haunted by what seems a ghost. In this counterfeit world only the pragmatic Tom thrives, for he alone recognizes that there is no distinction that matters between what is real and what is only apparently real.

In 1974 Highsmith brought out the third volume of her loosely connected sequence, *Ripley's Game*. Six months have passed since *Ripley Under Ground*, and Tom has resumed his civilized, easygoing life as a country gentleman. But one night at a party he's snubbed by a local art framer named Jonathan Trevanny. Trevanny, Tom knows, is suffering from leukemia and has between six and twelve years to live. He also has a French wife and a little son to provide for. So when the smuggler and fence Reeves Minot needs a favor—a matter of killing a couple of Mafiosi—Tom immediately refuses, but insidiously suggests that the respectable Trevanny might be tempted.

Unlike the other four Ripley novels, this one isn't presented wholly from Tom's point of view. Much of the first half of the action follows Trevanny, as he goes about his daily life, worries about his health, and mulls over Reeves's crazy, devilish proposal. It's just impossible. He's no killer. Still, close to \$100,000 would provide for Simone and little Georges. And doesn't he have a responsibility to them? Slowly, Highsmith traces the corruption of an ordinary man. In essence, she implies that any of us, however moral and upright we think ourselves, might become a Tom Ripley, given the right incentive.

Alas, as so often happens in a Ripley novel, after the first murder, another is required. But the second, Trevanny learns, can only be committed on a train, up close, with a garrote. Convinced that he will fail, Trevanny nonetheless agrees to try and—to his surprise—succeeds, albeit with some unexpected help. Unfortunately, a bodyguard survives and before long the Mafia comes calling on Reeves, Trevanny, and Tom.

Much of the action in Ripley's Game occurs in Hamburg, even as other novels in the quintet take the reader on whirlwind tours of Italian seaside towns, Salzburg, Berlin, and Tunis. Repeatedly, Tom responds to that common feeling—I experienced it strongly when living in Marseille during my early twenties—that once we step away from our familiar circles, we grow exuberantly, amorally free. Even crimes don't seem quite real in Italy or North Africa.

As a result, the Ripley novels can sometimes appear more fantastic than realistic, as artificial as *commedia dell' arte*, as unlikely in their vertiginous plot developments as a P.G. Wodehouse novel. After a double murder in Ripley's Game, Tom can temporarily abandon the corpses in his living room and settle down to a steak and a glass of beer. In the midst of general mayhem, he can pause to appreciate his backyard:

He took a stroll around the garden, gazed with some pride at the strawberry patch which he had recently snipped and weeded, and stared at three burlap sacks of dahlia roots that had been kept over the winter and were due for planting.

Even when preparing to defend his house against attack, he preserves an enviable insouciance:

Sorry, but I'm not used to discussing my plans. I usually play it by ear. But if you're willing, would you hide yourself in the shrubbery to the right of the door here—it's thicker on the right—and clout anyone who walks up and rings the doorbell?

It could be Bertie Wooster speaking.

Neither Bernard Tufts nor Jonathan Trevanny can achieve a comparable nonchalance or blitheness of spirit: they are respectively the earnest art forger and the down-to-earth art framer. Tom alone is a supremely confident artist, a master of improv. While everyone else leads a derivative life, shaped and bound by the actions of others, he remains utterly free. One never quite knows what he will do next. The man actually laughs during times of crisis, even in the middle of a murder. He's sometimes made to seem like a folkloric trickster or a pagan god, living in the moment, beyond good and evil. In *Ripley's Game* Tom actually functions as a *deus ex machina*, first setting the so-called game into motion, then appearing from out of nowhere at crucial times; he's depicted as bathed in a celestial light and finally even glimpsed speeding along in a car "like God himself."

In *The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980) Highsmith describes yet another unsuccessful Tom Ripley wannabe. Sixteen-year-old Frank Pierson has actually pushed his rich, disabled father over a cliff, though the world thinks the hateful old man's death an accident. Still, Frank is racked with guilt, and, having read about the old Dickie Greenleaf murder, unexpectedly turns up at Belle Ombre looking for sympathy and guidance. While Tom had been the corruptor of Jonathan Trevanny, here he becomes Frank's protector and alternate father.

After learning the truth about the death of the elder Pierson, Tom comforts the boy by telling him:

The act shouldn't be devastating—to the rest of your life. There's no reason to collapse.... Do you understand what I mean? You either let some event ruin your life or not. The decision is yours.—You're lucky, Frank, in your case the decision is yours, because no one is accusing you.

Later on, Tom further clarifies his principle of personal freedom:

Every mistake in life, Tom thought, had to be met by an attitude, either the right attitude or the wrong one, a constructive or self-destructive attitude. What was tragedy for one man was not for another, if he could assume the right attitude toward it. Frank felt guilty, which was why he had looked up Tom Ripley, and curiously Tom had never felt such guilt, never let it seriously trouble him. In this, Tom realized that he was odd. Most people would have experienced insomnia, bad dreams, especially after committing a murder such as that of Dickie Greenleaf, but Tom had not.

Alas, Frank—like Bernard Tufts and Jonathan Trevanny—finds his burden of guilt almost impossible to bear. Only what is clearly his growing love for Tom keeps him from buckling under.

In *Ripley Under Ground* and *Ripley's Game*, Tom's sexuality had been presented as tepidly conventional: he and Heloise make love, though not often. As Tom says,

He couldn't have borne a woman who made demands several times a week: that really would have turned him off, maybe at once and permanently.

That he can even support a woman's touch shows a kind of progress. In *The Talented Mr. Ripley* the least hint of lovemaking between Dickie and his girlfriend Marge would drive Tom berserk. In three of the later novels, Tom simply prefers the company of men, some of whom are probably gay though few are identified as such.

But in *The Boy Who Followed Ripley*, the homosexual subcurrent becomes manifest: Tom reads Christopher Isherwood's *Christopher and His Kind*, Frank prefers to sleep in Tom's bed without changing the sheets, both want to be in the other's company all the time. Even Heloise suspects that there's something odd going on. In the middle of one particularly idyllic day, Frank speaks of his happiness in language that Highsmith deliberately compares to "the words of a lover."

Still, after kidnapers target the young heir to the Pierson fortune, Tom persuades a reluctant Frank to return to America and restart his life. For a final treat, though, they decide on a short holiday in Berlin. There the two happily visit gay bars and nightclubs. Tom—who has already played many roles in life—finds himself fascinated by the drag queens. "No wonder Berliners liked disguises! One could feel free, and in a sense like *oneself* in a disguise." Before the novel's end Tom dons a

dress and heels—but ostensibly for reasons other than sexual excitement. The criminal, like the artist, must wear a mask.

Throughout these Berlin chapters, Highsmith celebrates the camaraderie and high spirits of homosexual life, deliberately contrasting its sensitivity and affection with the selfishness and careless extravagance of Frank's upper-class family. Social satire of this sort is common throughout Highsmith's work, but most contentiously in her later novels, in which she savagely depicts America as a land of sanctimony and barbarism. *A Dog's Ransom* (1972) presents New York as an urban cesspool; *People Who Knock on the Door* (1983) shows small towns as seats of hypocrisy and religious fanaticism. By contrast, her very last book, the fairy-tale-like *Small g: A Summer Idyll* (1995), again depicts the caring relationships among a group of Zurich homosexuals and bisexuals.

Highsmith's penultimate novel was also her final Ripley book. In *Ripley Under Water* (1991) Tom has reached his late thirties. He still lives in comfort with Heloise, enjoys delicious meals prepared by Madame Annette, gravely discusses his compost with gardener Henri the Giant, and looks forward to his weekly harpsichord lessons: "The thing about Bach," as he says, "is that he's instantly civilizing. Just a phrase...." Aside from the occasional favor for Reeves, Tom's sordid past seems far away. And then the Pritchards appear.

While many of Tom's earlier victims had been louts or vulgarians, David Pritchard is certainly the worst of the lot. He's crude, abuses his wife Janice, and lacks even a modicum of taste and all sense of propriety. Pritchard is, in effect, Tom's grotesque opposite, the dark-half embodiment of everything he hates and yet might have become without Dickie's money. When Tom visits the couple in their rented house, "the canapés were melted cheese bits stuck with a toothpick." There are even hints of a sadomasochistic marital relationship—a whip and chains are later found in the house's basement—and Janice frequently seems on the verge of hysteria. As Tom remarks, with delicious irony, "I don't understand cracked people."

In general, the five Ripley novels present a theme—the obsessive Tom–Dickie relationship of the first book—and four variations on it. While young Frank Pierson revered Tom Ripley and wanted, in some sense, to become him or at least win his approval, David Pritchard arbitrarily, impulsively decides to make Tom's life a living hell, to harass him with phone calls ostensibly from Dickie Greenleaf (who has been "found and resuscitated"), and, finally, to stalk his every move. As Janice Pritchard tells Tom, "David just likes to see people *wilt*—if he can. If he can make them wilt."

In due course, Tom attempts to escape from Pritchard's unwanted attentions by going on holiday to Tunis with Heloise and her friend Noëlle. (I have sometimes wondered if Highsmith means to hint that Heloise, as well as her husband, is drawn to her own sex; she is constantly visiting and traveling with Noëlle.) There Tom—who over the years has disguised himself as a rich expatriate, a grizzled painter, a French police officer, and a drag queen—slips into an Arab djellaba and deals, temporarily, with Pritchard. But the madman is indefatigable, and when Tom returns home he learns that his nemesis has hired a boat and is dragging all the local waterways for the body of Murchison, last seen in *Ripley Under Ground*. One morning a burlap sack is deposited on the doorstep of Belle Ombre. It contains a headless skeleton wearing Murchison's ring.

By this time, Tom's sigh is almost audible to the reader: Pritchard has simply given him no choice. And so he acts.

*Ripley Under Water* concludes Highsmith's strangely lighthearted thrillers examining the unstable nature of modern identity. Of the five novels the first is certainly the strongest and this last by far the weakest. Any of them can be faulted for improbability. Nonetheless, Tom remains such a wickedly attractive figure that it's always a treat to pass a few hours in his company. After all, he's been called the most charismatic psychopath in modern literature. To me he seems rather like a dapper criminal in an Ernst Lubitsch film: while he may occasionally resort to violence, Tom also knows that "courtesy and politeness were seldom a mistake." Even now he doubtless continues to reside in placid, civilized comfort at Belle Ombre.

Of course, the talented Mr. Ripley had his predecessors—"The Thrill Boys," one of the preliminary titles for the first novel, suggests the notorious Leopold and Loeb case of the 1920s—and critics have compared Tom to the dream-haunted and criminal Jay Gatsby, as well as to Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths, who drowns his girlfriend in *An American Tragedy*. I myself wonder about the possible influence of comics. The young Highsmith wrote copy for *Batman*, who—like nearly all the other superheroes—leads a double life: dapper man about town by day, but with a darker, more complex night life than the neighbors realize. As for Tom Ripley's successors, they are like the sands upon the seashore: all psychopaths are charming and well-mannered nowadays. In fiction, at least.

There was a time when readers were outraged that Highsmith never judges Tom, indeed quite likes him, even identifies with him as a fellow artist. (She occasionally signed letters or books "Tom/Pat.") Like Oscar Wilde, Highsmith insisted (in *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, 1966) that

art essentially has nothing to do with morality, convention or moralizing.... I find the public passion for justice quite boring and artificial, for neither life nor nature care if justice is ever done or not.

In this regard, Anthony Minghella's 1999 film of *The Talented Mr. Ripley* not only shows the young Tom as motivated largely by homosexual feelings (rather than envy and cupidity) but also further distorts the character by making sure he's punished and his spirit broken. This isn't the Tom of the novels, who never feels anguish or regret about anything. The best approach to life, Highsmith seems to say, is a kind of blithe nonchalance. Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first burden with guilt.

Over the last thirty years there have been several attempts to establish Patricia Highsmith as a major American writer. Unlike the successful campaigns for the once neglected Dawn Powell and the once marginalized Philip K. Dick, this hasn't quite happened. Still, the English critic and novelist A.N. Wilson has speculated that

when the dust has settled and when the chronicle of twentieth-century American literature comes to be written, history will place Highsmith at the top of the pyramid.

That seems exaggerated, but *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and its companions should at least rank among the most perversely entertaining novels of our time.