

# PATRICIA HIGHSMITH ON SCREEN



**Week One**

**'The Talented Ms Highsmith'**

## Welcome to *Patricia Highsmith on Screen*

### Week One

The two most common questions I hear when I mention Patricia Highsmith to those who do not specialise in memorising authors are:

1) Who?

or

2) Oh, *The Talented Mr Ripley* writer.

Now, while it is not uncommon for a single, popular character to overtake the others in a writer's canon, it does seem rather unfair for Tom Ripley to obscure a complex author's other work so regularly.

And Patricia Highsmith is a complex author. Open – to the degree available to her at the time – about her sexuality, she nonetheless made attempts to 'cure' it via psychoanalysis. Interestingly, this occurred while she was writing the novel *The Price of Salt*, later filmed as *Carol*, about two women engaged in a passionate affair – a work often considered the first lesbian novel with a 'happy ending'.

And, again, there were many who considered her to have a deep misogynistic streak.

She was an outspoken advocate of Palestinian rights but sadly fell prey to ugly antisemitism, despite intense love affairs with several Jewish women. She considered herself a liberal, but grew to espouse several bizarre, dog-whistle racial views.

It may come as no surprise, considering the conundrums at the heart of her personality, that she specialised and became known for her knotty psychological thrillers, including the *Ripliad*, the five novels that make up the story of her most famous creation.

And from Hitchcock's *Strangers On A Train* to *The Talented Mr Ripley*, *The Two Faces of January* and *Carol*, those complications have inspired cinema that is equally complex and, at times, challenging.

So how do we reckon with the work of a clearly *talented* woman who, nonetheless, too often disappointed as a human being, despite the many ways in which she broke progressive ground.

She tackled questions of identity and morality with rare insight – an insight, perhaps, that she failed to turn on herself. Over the next few weeks, we will consider these questions and more as we look at the adaptations of her work and the way in which filmmakers have wrestled with the often dark heart of Patricia Highsmith.

Kenton Hall  
May 2024

## A FEW FACTS ABOUT PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Patricia Highsmith was born Mary Patricia Plangman, on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1921, in Fort Worth, Texas. An only child, her parents divorced ten days before she was born, leading her mother and stepfather from whom she took her surname to move to New York City. Although when she was 12, she was sent away to live with her maternal grandmother for a year she called her 'saddest'.

She initially began writing for comic books in 1942, while moving between New York City and Mexico – earning \$55 a week in the only long-term job she would ever hold as an employee.

Her first novel *Strangers on a Train* was published in 1950, with her second, *The Price of Salt* initially appearing under a pseudonym – Claire Morgan – in 1952. Between 1950 and 1995, she wrote 22 novels and 8 books of short stories, quickly garnering a reputation as a thriller writer of unusual literary quality.

But that reputation was complicated by another – as a difficult person to know and work with. Her personal life was often troubled, her romantic relationships often stormy and short-term – she regularly maintained she loved animals far more than people - and she increasingly struggled with alcoholism as she grew older.

She could be, it was said, cruel, misogynistic – despite her many relationships with women - and antisemitic. A liberal social democrat, she nonetheless espoused racist views.

She passed away on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1995 in Switzerland, not long after her 74<sup>th</sup> birthday, leaving her estate to the Yaddo colony, an artists' community in New York and her literary estate to the Swiss National Archive.

A complicated artist, as revered as she is, by some, reviled, her impact and legacy seem enshrined in the literary and cinema worlds, regardless of how we feel about the flawed human being she undoubtedly was.

**SUGGESTED READING**

*Strangers on a Train* (1950)  
*The Price of Salt* (1952) (as *Claire Morgan*)  
(republished as *Carol* in 1990)  
*The Blunderer* (1954)  
*The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955)  
*Deep Water* (1957)  
*A Game for the Living* (1958)  
*Miranda the Panda Is on the Veranda* (1958)  
*This Sweet Sickness* (1960)  
*The Cry of the Owl* (1962)  
*The Two Faces of January* (1964)  
*The Glass Cell* (1964)  
*A Suspension of Mercy* (1965) (published as *The Story-Teller in the U.S.*)  
*Those Who Walk Away* (1967)  
*The Tremor of Forgery* (1969)  
*Ripley Under Ground* (1970)  
*Eleven* (1970)  
*A Dog's Ransom* (1972)  
*Ripley's Game* (1974)  
*Edith's Diary* (1977)  
*The Boy Who Followed Ripley* (1980)  
*People Who Knock on the Door* (1983)  
*Found in the Street* (1986)  
*Ripley Under Water* (1991)  
*Small g: a Summer Idyll* (1995)

## SUGGESTED VIEWING

*Strangers On A Train (1951) – Alfred Hitchcock,*  
*Annabel (1962) – Alfred Hitchcock Hour*  
*Le Meurtrier (1963)*  
*Plein Soleil (1960)*  
*Ripley Under Ground (1970)*  
*The Designated Victim (1971)*  
*Edith's Diary (1973)*  
*Ripley's Game (1974)*  
*The American Friend (1977)*  
*The Glass Cell (1978)*  
*Throw Momma From The Train (1987)*  
*The Talented Mr Ripley (1999)*  
*CSI – Episode 'A Night At the Movies' (2003)*  
*The Cry of the Owl (2009)*  
*The Two Faces of January (2014)*  
*A Mighty Nice Man (2014)*  
*Carol (2015)*  
*A Kind of Murder (2016)*  
*Do Revenge (2022)*  
*Ripley (2024)*

## ABOUT THE TUTOR

Kenton Hall is an award-winning Canadian writer, director, musician and teacher, with numerous film credits to his name, both behind and in front of the camera. Kenton previously designed and taught a BTEC in Creative Media Production through Leicester College and teaches various film-related courses across the Midlands. He has played a variety of roles on stage and screen, from *Les Misérables* and *Muppets Most Wanted*, to *4th Floor of Singapore* and *The Honourable Rebel*.

In 2015, he directed and starred in the feature film *A Dozen Summers* – and in August 2019, his first book *Bisection* was published by Chinbeard Books, a comic memoir about living and parenting with bipolar disorder. In 2021, he co-wrote the Audible Original *Getting Better – The Fight for NHS* starring Rhod Gilbert, Neve McIntosh, Kathryn Drysdale and Mark Gatiss and 2023 co-wrote, co-produced and co-directed an audio resurrection of the lost Lon Chaney classic *London After Midnight*, this time starring international legend Art Malik.

His first album as Kenton Hall & The Necessary Measures, *Idiopath*, is available for pre-order now.